

FALL  
1945

# PLANET STORIES

20c

STRANGE ADVENTURES  
ON OTHER WORLDS  
—THE UNIVERSE OF  
FUTURE



PARKHURST

*the* **BUBBLE DWELLERS**

BY ROSS ROCKLYNNE

**JUGGERNAUT OF SPACE**

BY RAY CUMMINGS

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# PLANET STORIES



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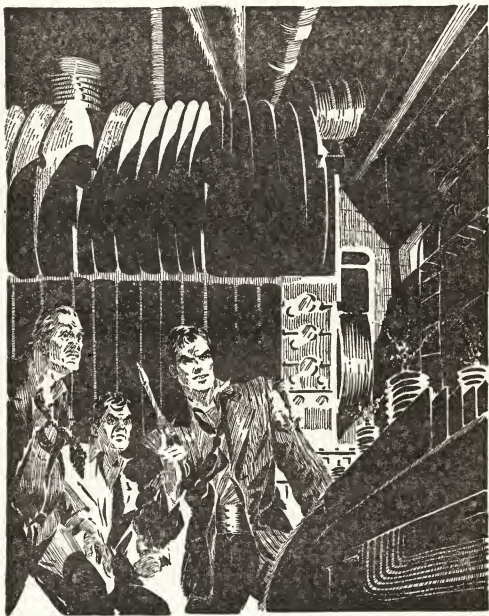
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# Juggernaut of Space

By RAY CUMMINGS

Never had the mind of man conceived so horrible a doom as was reaching for Earth. Never had a greater need for Earth's valiant champions been needed. And yet the only ones who could fight the menace—were five futile humans, prisoners on another world.







Illustrated by INGELS

**M**Y NAME is Robert Rance. You've heard of me, of course—through the recent weird affair of the Crimson Comet, if for nothing else. It seems to me rather ironic: for five years I have been reporting popular science items on the split-wave band of non-visual broadcasting. Station WANA-NYC—the main outlet of *Amalgamated Newscasters' Association*, for whom I work, I struggled for personal publicity.

Then I was plunged—certainly entirely against my will—into the blood-chilling, gruesome adventure which is now popularly known as "The Death of the Crimson Comet." Out of it has come publicity beyond my wildest dreams. And now that I've got it, I don't want it. I'm not a hero, of dauntless, fearless courage. I'm not a scientific genius, who has made possible to Earth the New Era of Interplanetary Travel. But I've been called all

that by broadcasting asses who are my friends.

I'm just a plain American, who, when his life is in danger gets frightened as the devil, fighting to get himself out of a jam, and with not much thought of anything else. I didn't relish that Crimson Comet business, and I don't want ever to experience anything like it again. I'm not alone in this. There were four others in it with me. They don't like all this public fuss being made over them any more than I do. They weren't heroic. They just tried their best not to get killed. So on their behalf, and my own, I'm writing this narrative of exactly what happened to us. Not the professionally glamorized version which you've heard so many times. Just the facts.

The thing must have been brewing, under cover, for many months. Like a smouldering, unnoticed fire. No one knows; we can only guess at what happened. But looking back on it now, there were incidents, seemingly unrelated at the time, which now I can see were significant. The first of them was in August, 1985—about a year ago. I had just finished a broadcast on some trivial, popular science subject, which I had tried to make sound important to my listeners. And Dr. Johns of the White Mountains Observatory telephoned me. I knew him quite well; he had often steered me into little subjects for my broadcasts, but this, I could see at once, was something different. The tel-grid showed his thin face without its usual smile. His grey hair was rumpled; his eyes bloodshot. He looked as though he hadn't slept for much too long.

"I thought you might want to come up and see me, Bob," he suggested.

"Sure I will. I always appreciate your tips, Dr. Johns."

His smile was queer. "I haven't got anything—not that you can use," he said. "Certainly not yet. I guess I just figure I'll feel better, talking about it. When can you arrive?"

"I'll come right away," I told him. "Not busy tonight. I'll be there by midnight."

We disconnected. I was just about to leave when Shorty Dirk walked in on me. Shorty was—and still is—connected with

the *American Newspaper Publishers*—a reporter in the Crime Division, specializing in reporting the work of the Bureau of Missing Persons. He and I were good friends, perhaps because we are so different. I'm big and rangy, slow-going and easy-tempered. In college I was a good athlete, but now this radio work was putting quite a bit of soft poundage on me which didn't belong—poundage which, I do assure you, the Crimson Comet business got rid of in a hurry. Like all of us five, I was something like an undernourished greyhound when we got back.

Shorty isn't much over five and a half feet, thin and wiry and alert—a sort of little human dynamo; a freckle-faced fellow with a shock of bristly red hair and a good-natured grin.

"Where you going?" he asked.

I told him. "I'll go with you," he said. He grinned. "I'm only here, Bob, because I haven't got anything better to do."

WE TOOK my small flyer from the roof stage and headed north. It was a handsome night, warm and almost cloudless with the upper air so clear that the stars were packed solid on the purple-blue vault of the heavens. Shorty and I didn't theorize, during the brief trip up to the White Mountains, on what Dr. Johns might have to say. Shorty wasn't much interested in astronomy, anyway—to him, as he often said, it was an uninteresting enigma. He mentioned that tonight.

"Good," I said. "Then, how is crime coming? Many people missing lately?"

Things were dull, he assured me. Nothing but the usual run of stuff that you couldn't write up or broadcast because nobody but a few relatives were interested. As it happened, the Crimson Comet affair caused five mysterious disappearances, Shorty, myself and three others. I think I can understand now why it happened that I knew them all. I must have been marked, through my widely broadcast popular science. That involved Shorty, because he was so much with me. And as for the other three—looking back on it now I realize that each of them vanished soon after having been with me. I was being trailed and was seized last.

We landed on the private stage of the big Observatory about midnight and pres-

ently were with Dr. Johns in his study. What he had to tell us didn't seem very startling at the time. But in the light of what was to happen, looking back on it now I can see its deadly significance. Like a great pattern of evil, to involve disaster and death to all the world! Grim, stealthy events creeping upon us—little things here on Earth just involving me and those few others; and with them, giant events mysteriously taking place out in the great vault of the stars.

"Here at the Observatory," Dr. Johns was saying, "we thought that somehow we must be making miscalculations. A fraction of a second in the axial and orbital movements of the Earth, which involved the visual movement of all the starfield. But we checked and rechecked. And then other observatories reported it."

The Earth's axial rotation, and its movement around the Sun apparently were changing infinitesimally.

"Too bad," Shorty commented. "I'm sure sorry."

But Dr. Johns didn't smile. "There seem to be many unrelated things," he said. "You can shrug any of them off. But then, if it once occurs to you that they might be connected—"

"What other things?" I asked.

Meteorologists were admitting that the weather was peculiar. Nothing which had not occurred before, of course—unusual, freakish storms in many parts of the Earth.

"And for a month now," Dr. Johns went on, "there has been noticeable a peculiar purple radiance in the air at night."

"Purple radiance?" Shorty echoed. "Hadn't noticed it."

"Because it isn't visible to the naked eye," Dr. Johns retorted. "But it has disturbed the exposure time of our photographic work. Slowed it down. And our spectrograms show it, or at least they show its effects so that we know if we could see it—it would be a purplish glow."

And there was a new comet which several of the observatories recently had located. I had heard that much—had mentioned it in one of my broadcasts.

"We call it a comet," Dr. Johns explained, "because there's a crimson radiance streaming back from it as it comes in toward the Sun. But its nucleus seems sizable—five hundred miles in diameter

possibly. A planetoid, with a radiance. You might just possibly call it that."

"And it's just about now crossing the orbit of Mars," I said. "That was the last report made public, wasn't it?"

Dr. Johns nodded. "Our calculations of its orbit—made a month ago—showed it would pass within about twenty million miles of Earth. But that's all changed now. It's erratic."

I was beginning to see why he was startled. This new Crimson Comet wasn't obeying the normal laws of Celestial Mechanics. It was swimming erratically in Space. Could it be a solid body as big as five hundred miles in diameter? Solid enough to be the cause, by its proximity, of the Earth's axial and orbital disturbances?

"And this purple radiance," Dr. Johns said soberly, "we've just been wondering if that could be coming from the comet."

**I** NEED NOT specify all the weird theories that Dr. Johns and I talked of that evening. With me, a broadcaster of popular science as lurid always as I could make it, weird, gruesome theories came natural. But with him, a man of cold logic and careful science—well, it must have been a premonition. Was this Crimson Comet hurling a lethal radiance at us, attacking the Earth? A tiny, inhabited world of diabolic science enabling it to direct its own course through Space, peopled with weird enemies coming at us now, bent on destroying us?

You couldn't make such speculations public. People would laugh. But some wouldn't. Some would believe you, and go into a wild panic. And Dr. Johns had sent for me—a sort of kindred spirit in the concocting of wild tales.

"You too, say nothing of this," he warned us. "And if it goes on, you can announce it, Bob." He shrugged again, and tried to laugh lugubriously. "I feel like an idiot, talking about the end of the world with a couple of news-hounds. And yet, somehow, I also feel that maybe everyone of us on Earth is in more deadly danger than he ever was before!"

And we certainly were!

That was the general gist of our talk that night with Dr. Johns. I never found out more from him—I had no time. The

thing struck at me four days later. During those four days, it happened that quite by chance I met the three other people who were destined to be plunged with Shorty and myself into adventure. The first was Peter Mack. I was walking at night in Washington Square, in New York City—small remaining tradition of little old New York. To me it's like a Monks' Garden, flowered, tree-lined rectangle enclosed by the massive building walls with the canyon of Fifth Avenue running into it.

The night was hot and clear. The little tent of blue over the Square was star-filled. I chanced to sit down for a moment on a bench.

"Got a light?" There was a young fellow on the bench with me. He shifted toward me. He was a thin, lanky fellow about my own age, hatless, with the starlight on his sparse, rumpled sandy hair. A slack-jawed fellow, with shabby clothes. He had a grimy cigarette butt between his fingers.

"I can do better than that," I smiled. I gave him a cigarette and lighted it for him.

"Thanks." He would have turned away, but I stopped him. I don't know why, but there seemed something about him that was likable. He needed a shave badly; his clothes were torn. I had a look at his eyes, red-rimmed, bloodshot. Just a down-and-outer on a park bench. But you don't see many of them these days.

"Maybe you haven't got a job," I said. "I can tell you a dozen places—easy work too—in case you're a stranger in town."

"I'm not," he said. "Thanks for the cigarette. I'm just minding my own business."

I shrugged; and as he gave me a resentful look and shifted back to his own end of the bench, I let him alone.

I know now a lot of things that were the matter with Peter Mack, but he has asked me not to go into details. It isn't important anyway; resentfulness at a girl; the escape mechanism of too much drink; trouble with the authorities in a lot of minor ways. And then a sort of sullen resentment at everything and everybody. A derelict who could salvage himself but he didn't want to.

ANYWAY, that was Peter Mack. And then there was Vivian La Marr. I met her back stage at the *Gayety* with Shorty who was there to see the stage manager who was to be a witness in some trivial crime-affair that Shorty was reporting. This Vivian La Marr was the main reason why the *Gayety* was having trouble with the Anti-Vice League and was about to lose its license. She came up to me back stage—a lush, artificial blonde, heavy with makeup; with an amazing expanse of flesh smooth as satin, and a negligible tinsel costume that the Anti-Vice League did not like at all but which pleased the *Gayety's* customers very much.

"You're Robert Rance," she said. "I saw your picture an' wasn't you televised a few times."

I agreed that was so.

"I also heard one of your astronomy lectures," she added with a wry grimace. "I was wonderin' how a guy like that could live with himself." She looked me up and down. "Now I see you ain't so bad," she said. She was grinning.

"Much obliged," I said. "Maybe I can teach you astronomy some time!"

"From you I would be glad to learn anything," she retorted, mockingly. We were standing by the stage door where it was cooler, and a moment later she was called back on the stage.

That was Vivian La Marr. The other person who was destined to be involved with us was J. Walter Blaine, the International Financier. I interviewed him at his Fifth Avenue Club. He tells me now that I may say what I like concerning my impression of him that first time I met him. So I will be absolutely frank.

A man of multi-millions and international importance makes many friends, and inevitably many enemies. Seldom can he know what people really think of him. His enemies exaggerate the worst, and his friends mostly fawn. Blaine's personal reputation, by hearsay, had reached me, of course. I had no expectation of liking him, and, very frankly, I didn't. I found him a big man, as tall as myself, heavy, portly from easy living. But I must say his appearance was impressive—a big mane of shaggy hair, a rather handsome, large-featured face, keen dark eyes under heavy brows, a jutting chin.

He was playing chess with a fellow club member and I sat down to watch. I know something about chess and I think his playing very well displayed his character. He won, with skill of aggressive attack. But there was about it something you didn't like. His incisive moving of his men, as though there could be no doubt that it was the correct move; and his whole attitude made you hope it wasn't. It was a quite informal game. Once Blaine made an obvious, rather silly mistake, exposing a piece. His opponent offered to have him take it back. He didn't; he pretended it was what he wanted to do, taking the loss rather than admit his error.

Then he was finished and turned to me. I was there to interview him for the Editor of a booklet being issued by the Royal Astronomical Society of London. It seems that the Society was issuing a booklet with little character sketches of the people from whom they had obtained donations—sort of a tribute of thanks. I was commissioned to write the one on Blaine.

"Did they tell you how much I gave them?" he demanded of me now.

I shook my head.

"No," I said.

His smile was ironic. "I gave them a hundred pounds. What they wanted, and expected, was ten thousand. So now you'll write something very nice about me which they hope will flatter me so I'll give them more. Don't bother, young man."

Blaine was a bachelor. My first impression of him was that he was doing some woman a favor by keeping himself in that category.

So much for J. Walter Blaine.

It was the next night that the weird thing struck at me. I was walking along the edge of the park, alone on my way to the mid-town office of Amalgamated Newscasters. The street was fairly brightly lighted. I recall that there chanced to be no pedestrians near me, just an empty length of grey-white stone pavement in front of me, with the park on one side. And quite suddenly it was as though I had stepped through a black door into nothingness! I could have been stricken blind, yet it was not that, for in another split-second I could see a dim, red radiance and hear voices. Then I could see the shapes of people—three men and a woman—stum-

bling like myself on a strange earthy ground here in the red darkness.

"Look! Here comes another one of us!" It was a terrified man's voice, vaguely familiar.

"My Gawd, it's the handsome astronomer! I know him!" The voice of Vivian La Marr.

And then there was Shorty's voice! "Bob! Bob Rance!" I could feel him gripping me and there was the vague outline of his frightened white face at my shoulder. "Bob! Tell us—what's happened to all of us?"

And Vivian cried: "Hang onto him! There he goes!" I was trying to speak but my tongue was thick, my throat dry and congested.

Things were dim and hazy in my mind; and I could feel the cool blankness stealing through my muscles. The touch of hands on my arms faded, until at last there was no more sensation. I made one last great effort to bring myself out of the fog.

Then I felt myself falling into a soundless blackness.



## II

I THINK I did not quite lose consciousness. I was aware that I had fallen to the earthly ground, with Shorty and Vivian bending over me. My head was roaring; I was bathed in cold sweat. Then I began to feel better, trying to sit up, with Shorty's arm holding me.

"You're all right now, Bob? Can't you speak?"

"Yes. I—guess so."

Whatever had happened which had brought me here when an instant ago, it seemed, I was walking alone by the park, none of us could imagine. The identical experience had happened to Shorty, to Vivian La Marr; and to Peter Mack, and J. Walter Blaine.

"But—where are we?" I demanded, when in another moment I was strong enough to struggle upright in the crimson glowing darkness.

"Damned if we know," Shorty said. It seemed a sort of underground grotto. I could begin to make out its rocky walls and ceiling now, with that glow like a crimson phosphorescence streaming from them. One by one my companions had found themselves here. Blaine was the first. Then at intervals it seemed as though the wall across the grotto had opened and Shorty, Vivian and Mack came stumbling in, standing an instant, dazed, and then falling, as I had fallen, almost in a normal faint.

"No way of getting out of this damned place," Shorty was saying. "The rock-wall over there moves like a door, but we haven't been able to open it."

How much time had passed since we were stricken with this weird thing, none of us could guess. Suddenly I was startled. My clothes were too big for me. My body felt thin; I had lost twenty or thirty pounds. And in the dim crimson glow now I could see Mack, Vivian and Blaine fairly well. All of them thinner than I remembered them, with faces drawn and haggard and big glowing smouldering eyes. And we men had a growth of beard.

Weeks could have passed! Vivian laughed lugubriously as she met my startled stare. "De-glamorized," she said. "I feel like a lost alley cat." She was clad in a thin, summer street dress. Her lush lis-

some curves were gone so that it hung drably on her. The vivid artificial blonde hair was darkish at the roots; it fell in a tangled mass to her shoulders. Her make-up was gone; her lips pallid. "We're all about starved to death, if you ask me," she added.

"He brought us food a while ago," Blaine put in.

"Try to eat it," Mack said. "There's some of it over by the wall. If that's what we've been living on, no wonder we're starved."

"He? Food?" I stammered.

Since Blaine had found himself here, what seemed like perhaps twelve hours had passed. Our captor had come twice. They had only seen him dimly.

"But he's human—semi-human, anyway," Shorty said. "And he seems to talk English a little."

"Look!" Vivian suddenly murmured. "Here he comes again."

The red glow across the cave for an instant brightened. It seemed as though a rock had slid aside and closed again. A dim upright shape moved toward us; stopped and stood regarding us with eyes that gleamed green, smouldering in the dimness.

"The Great Mind—ready—see you soon," the figure's weird, guttural voice said.

I moved forward, unsteadily on my feet. "I want to talk to you," I said. I could see him now, quite plainly. A man? I suppose you could call him that. He was about five feet tall, squat and square, with high square shoulders, a rectangular torso and two legs which seemed encased in a flexible metal grey fabric. His head was round, set upon a triangular neck with its apex under his chin—a bullet head, hairless, with a weird, boxlike face, square-chinned and broad square nose. His two arms, long and powerful-looking, dangled at his sides.

THIS, we were soon to learn, was a Radak. I recall my first clear impression that there was about him a queer sense of power. And something else, mysterious, yet even more apparent. An automaton-like quality. It was as though here were an individual who was only acting his role as a tiny part of some great, organ-



ized thing. A cog in a machine. The German Nazis of my father's boyhood, must have been like that. And here with these Radaks of the Crimson Comet it seemed intensified to be almost gruesome. You could not tell why, but you could sense it. Human individuals who lived only to do what they were told. A great mental force dominating them from birth to death, so that they thought what they were told to think; only did what they were told to do.

This Radak answered our questions now; he seemed willing enough to talk, though in many ways his knowledge of our language, newly absorbed by his weird brain, was inadequate. I think it best to summarize briefly here, the total of what we learned and saw of the strange little world and its people. In actuality we were destined to see very little. Doomed little world! And since its death now, as you all know, most of its secrets will forever remain a mystery.

It was some five hundred Earth-miles in diameter, doubtless of immense density because we were not aware of much change of gravitational force. Of its past history, no one knows much. Somewhere out in Interplanetary Space it must once have had a normal orbit. I shall explain more of that later.

Two human races were here now. The Radaks—there were perhaps something like a thousand or two of them—were the rulers. The others were the Lei—a primitive, gentle people, no more than slaves to the dominating Radaks. Nature always had been cruel, uncompromising, here on Zelos. (Which was the word their native language seemed to call their world.) Both Radaks and Lei lived always in great underground caverns with which this section of the surface was honeycombed. Above them, on the outer surface, weird storms and erratic extremes of heat and cold were prevalent. And out there strange monsters roamed—the Deathless Things, as they were called, since it was impossible to kill them. Creatures of indescribable horrible quality who seemed unwilling to come into the confines of the underground corridors and grottos, so that all the humans were of necessity driven here, eking out a drab and grim existence.

How the strange science of the Radaks

developed will forever remain a mystery. Perhaps it was brought here from some other planet. Despite the science, life here was primitive—a struggle for the bare necessities. Queerly enough, the Radak science seemed not concerned with better living. They had a few small space-fliers—the secret of interplanetary travel was known to them. Perhaps only recently—that seems rather certain. Beyond that, there was nothing save the weird, mysterious mechanisms by which at last they had been able to control the space-movements of their tiny world. It was all here, in what they called the "Great Cavern of Machines." Shorty and I were there for a brief time—an unforgettable time of horror.

"The Great Mind will see us soon?" I was saying now to this Radak who stood stiff and stolid beside me. "Who—what is that?"

We were soon to see. Another Radak appeared, motioning us imperiously to follow him. Neither of these fellows seemed to have any weapons on them, though of course there was no way of telling. Shorty nudged me, muttering something about starting a fight.

"You're crazy," I whispered. "We'd be killed."

"The Great Mind—want see you now," one of the Radaks said. He led us, and we followed him, with the other Radak behind us, out into a dim rock-corridor gleaming with that same crimson phosphorescence.

The banker, Blaine, pushed past me. "I'll attend to this," he said. "This Ruler, whoever he is, he can be bought. I'll get him to take us back to Earth—promise him riches—"

The ragged, cadaverous Mack gave Blaine a glance of contempt. "I guess it's strange to you, not being able to buy everything with your money, isn't it?" he commented.

A distant murmur of voices sounded ahead of us now, and we could see where the light-glow widened as the corridor emerged into another grotto. More Radaks were around us now, herding us with their stiff, jerky movements, jabbering with their strange guttural voices. The murmur ahead of us grew louder; then we emerged from the tunnel.

IT WAS at first almost like being above ground—a huge grotto with red-glowing ceiling high up, dim in the crimson haze. To the sides the precipitous rock-walls widened rapidly out. Ahead of us, down a ragged, undulating slope, there was only a red haze of distance. There seemed to be distant fields, with things growing in them. There was a spindly blue and red stalk-like vegetation growing like trees perhaps to a height of a hundred feet. And off to the left, under the trees, there were mound-shaped little buildings.

We were on a broad level space at the top of the slope. A hundred or more Radaks were here, some crowding at us, but most standing stiff, gazing at us with gleaming, animal-like eyes. And now I saw Radak women and children among them—the women broader-hipped, narrower shouldered. But they were all cast in the same mold—even the children stood at attention, like rows of little statues waiting for something to move them, with only their eyes in motion.

Most of the murmuring voices were further down the slope. A crowd of figures milled about, down there, trying to see us better. A thousand perhaps. The Lei, the slaves of this little world. Certainly they seemed far more human than the Radaks—slim and slight, and some of them as tall as Shorty. They were dressed in simple flowing fabric garments. A bronzed-skinned people, the women with long-flowing hair.

"You come—this way," the Radak said. "Now—you stand still—the Great Mind speak to you."

Ruler of the Crimson Comet. He sat on a sort of stone throne with a leafy canopy over him. Our captors shoved us forward until we stood in a wavering line, all of us staring blankly at this Being whose mentality encompassed and dominated every living human on his tiny world. He looked as though once he had had the aspect of a Radak. But that perhaps was a hundred or two hundred Earth-years ago. He sat now with his shriveled, wrinkled grey body small as a child, encased in a single garment of woven fabric. His round head, devoid of hair, wobbled on a spindly neck. Skin like shriveled grey parchment covered his shrunken bony face giving him a mummy-like appearance of

immense age. His shiny, smooth-grey skull seemed bloated by the pulsating brain-tissue within it. It bulged in places, with worm-like knots under the scalp, dilating, quivering, as his huge green-glowing eyes regarded us.

Then he spoke, slowly with a measured, sonorous voice of weird sepulchral tone. And what he said—it was as though here we faced a mental power too great to resist; as though there could be no question but that his thoughts must be our thoughts. I felt it with a sudden strange shudder—a radiance of thought from him, beating down, destroying whatever was within me of independent individualism. And the realization swept me; if I yielded to this radiance—these thought-waves, whatever they might be, then all that was Robert Rance would be gone. I would be nothing but an automaton.

He was saying, "You will listen. There are things I shall explain to you Earthmen. I have sent to Earth and brought you here—because each of you has a knowledge of many things on Earth that I wish to know."

I LISTENED, numbed, somewhat perhaps as though hypnotized. In this Radak ruler's judgment, Blaine the banker, Mack the derelict, Shorty, myself and Vivian—the sum total of the myriad things that were stacked in our brains—were what now must go into his. Certainly a varied, representative strata of Earth-knowledge.

"You want to learn everything we know?" Blaine suddenly said. "How can you do that? Suppose we don't want to teach you? And why do you want to learn it? What are your plans? What I want to know is—do you realize who and what I am, on Earth?"

Of us all, undoubtedly the dominating nature of J. Walter Blaine made him best able to resist that weird mental force that was engulfing us. Yet his manner, his querulous, arrogant questions under these strange, unearthly conditions here on the Crimson Comet certainly were fatuous, childish. Mack gave a short, disagreeable laugh.

"On Earth, okay," Mack muttered. "But you don't amount to much here."

"Money of course, won't mean anything

to you," Blaine was saying. "But I have other things on Earth—things you would want. Look here, if you'll send all these people away, I'll have a talk with you. I'll—"

He got no further. It seemed that a look of wonderment was upon the shriveled, ancient grey face. The eyes were darting little green fires. The measured voice said, "I shall attend to you later—" And then droned into the Radak tongue. Four of the squat little men marched upon Blaine, seizing him.

"What in the devil—stop that!" Blaine remonstrated. There was a scuffle beginning. I recall that I shouted,

"Blaine! Take it easy! You'll be killed!"

Amazing power of these squat little men! A claw-like hand was clapped over Blaine's mouth; his flailing arms and kicking legs were pinned by the Radak's clutches; and then they picked him up and carted him away.

"I shall begin with you, Peter Mack," the Radak ruler said quietly. "Come forward, bend before me."

For a second Mack hesitated, flinging Shorty and me a questioning glance. But we had nothing to offer. Then the shabby, lanky figure of the bearded Mack shuffled forward, guided by two Radaks until he was standing with head bent before the Ruler. Down the slope the murmurs of the crowd of Lei rose into a babble. The milling throng of slave-people a hundred yards or so from us crowded curiously forward to see Mack better. There was a sudden, low-voiced command from the Radak Ruler. A dozen or more of the squat, grey Radaks ran at the Lei, cuffing them, knocking them back . . . I saw a young Lei girl, slim, with flowing white and tawny hair framing her face. The little automaton Radak ran at her, struck her in the mouth so that the blood spurted out.

And through it all, near me a row of Radak children stood stiffly at attention, motionless, with only their round green eyes turning sidewise to watch the scene.

Then the ancient Radak Ruler's smouldering gaze was upon Mack's head. An awed silence fell over the scene as Mack stood motionless. Who shall say by what weird and gruesome process Mack was now being sapped! No one on Earth

knows what a thought is. No one can say what is within our brain cells to constitute knowledge. But something is there, something in our conscious and subconscious minds upon which our memory can draw. And we do know that thought is a wave of vibration—an infinitely tiny, infinitely rapid vibration. A thing that at least has a tangible entity. And this Radak's mind now was drawing, sapping from Mack.

A minute. Five minutes. In the tense silence, I felt Shorty clutch at me, heard him mutter: "God, it's weird!"

Mack now was drooping. A mental agony, rasping his nerves now, drawing vitality from him so that he drooped, swayed, and suddenly let out a groan. Mental anguish, with screaming nerves translating it into physical pain.

"It's torture!" Vivian murmured. "Look at him—stop it! Stop it!"

Mack had fallen to the ground, writhing now, mumbling with futile hands clawing



at his face and head as though to pluck away that damnable, torturing gaze. But still, calmly, inexorably the green-eyed, monstrous little Radak held him—this shriveled Radak Ruler, avidly, greedily drawing in the knowledge of Mack's past life—those myriad little things of Earth-life stored within Mack's brain. Surely it must have been a torture most horrible.

**S**HORTY and I were starting to leap forward in protest. But Vivian was ahead of us, raging, rushing heedlessly at the old Radak. She almost reached him. She was screaming, "You—you rotten damn Thing—you—"

Her hand went up to strike him. It was all a sudden chaos, just a few seconds. Radaks caught Shorty and me; with almost machine-like strength their arms pinned us. I think I yelled at Shorty not to struggle. In that same second, I saw Vivian's arm with clenched fist trying to hit the Radak Ruler, but a little squat grey figure standing guard there, jumped and seized her. It was an amazing tableau. At the threatened blow, the Ruler shrank back. His whole little body quivered, pulsated; and on the weird, almost unhuman face, there was a look, not of fear, but of strange revulsion—as though the threat of that physical blow were something too horrible to contemplate.

"Vivian! Vivian—you—they'll kill you! Run—Vivian, run—"

Mack was staggering to his feet, stumbling, half falling. But he reached Vivian, clutched her. Both of them were confused, dazed so that all they could do was stand there, holding onto each other. I saw Mack gazing defiantly at the oncoming Radaks—Mack who on Earth probably wouldn't have lifted a hand to help anyone, ready now to fight to protect this girl.

"You will all—stand—away from them." It was the Ruler's quiet, measured voice. And abruptly I saw that his shriveled hand had gone to his belt. A weapon was hanging there—a little pot-bellied black cylinder. His fingers shifted it, seemed aiming it at Vivian and Mack. Shorty and I were struggling, but the Radaks held us. And we were both shouting. Then there was a soundless, almost invisible flash, just a vague spitting glow

of light from the little cylinder. It leaped and for a second clung upon Mack and the girl. They seemed to stiffen. Just that; nothing else. Still clutching each other they stood transfixed, and on their faces there was a blankness, a strange emptiness.

"You will walk together, hand in hand," the Ruler's soft voice was droning. "One of my Radaks will lead you to the upper exit. And then you will walk together alone—out into the Realm of the Deathless Things."

He added something in his own language. A little Radak moved in front of Mack and Vivian now. Hand in hand they were standing docile, and then they were following the Radak—following him with slow measured steps, their faces blank, their eyes staring straight ahead of them. Like somnambulists, walking in their sleep.

"Good Lord," Shorty murmured. "That could be the way we were abducted on Earth! Do you suppose—"

**H**IS WORDS were cut off. The Ruler had given another command. The Radaks gripping us were pulling us away—shoving us back into the dim crimson tunnel from which they had brought us. I turned to look behind me. The stiff figures of Mack and Vivian still were visible, walking in a trance, following the square, box-like little Radak who marched silently ahead of them. For a moment they wound along the edge of the slope; then the crimson murk of radiance enveloped them and they were gone.

Roughly Shorty and I were shoved along the tunnel by our captors. Then a rock panel slid aside. We were shoved in, and the panel slid closed.

"Well," Shorty murmured. "That's that. We're in a jam, Bob—a damn weird jam."

It was soundless in here, and darker than out in the main open grotto. But still there was that dim crimson glow. We were in a small cave-cell now. The air was hot, fetid, earthy. Presently we could see a little better. There was nothing but black, spongy ground, glowing red rock walls and a rock ceiling close over us. In the dimness I fumbled, feeling the wall, trying to find the crevice of the

sliding door panel; but could not.

Time passed. Shorty and I both realized now that we were weak and faint from hunger—not altogether the hunger from missing a meal or so, but the depletion of long under-nourishment. Together we lay down on the fibrous ground. I think at that moment I was more despairing than ever before in my life. I seemed unable to cope with even the thought of what we might possibly plan. I closed my eyes. I seemed just to want to drift into the blessed relief of sleep.

"This is one jam we might not get out of Bob," Shorty murmured presently.

"Yes, looks so."

Then suddenly both of us were galvanized into alertness. The door-panel was sliding open with a little rasp and an influx of brighter red glow. Outside in the corridor we saw a group of Radaks on guard. But none of them came in. They moved aside and a figure came past them—a Lei girl. Her slim body was draped in a bluish garment of thatch. Her long tawny hair flowed down over her shoulders. She was carrying a slab on which there was food and drink for us.

Then she set the slab on the ground near us. She was between us and the door, almost a silhouette but I could see that her hand was at her lips and her glowing eyes seemed warning us to be silent.

For an instant she leaned close toward me. "I am Tahn—the wife of Taro, the Lei." Her voice barely whispered it. "You say nothing. I come again—with Taro's plan to help you! We would save you and your Earth—if we can!"

Silent, Shorty and I just stared. Then she had turned and was gone. The rock panel slid closed upon us.

### III

**I** MUST EXPLAIN now what was happening to Mack and Vivian as they afterward told it to me. Mack recalls quite clearly that moment of dazed, numbed anguish when he writhed on the ground with the horrible sapping gaze of the Radak Ruler upon him. Then he heard Vivian scream, saw her rushing at the shriveled old Radak.

He called, "Vivian! Run—they'll kill you—"

He found himself staggering to his feet, stumbling until he was by her side. He felt her clutch him, both of them standing there, numbed and dazed, terrified, with the feeling that the rushing Radaks would instantly kill them. He remembers that the girl and himself took a stumbling step forward. To Mack it was like stumbling through a suddenly appearing black curtain of emptiness. Just an abyss of soundless nothingness, except that there seemed still to be Vivian's clutch on his arm. No, it was her hand holding his as they stood peering at a distant blur of red radiance.

"Viv—where are we? What happened?"

"Pete—I'm frightened—can't—see anything—"

But the red radiance was growing, spreading to dispel the blank empty darkness so that in a moment he could see the diabolical, disheveled form of the girl beside him, her moist, cold hand convulsively clutching his, and the red light on her pallid, terrified face. And in the distance now there were outlines—a sort of red line that looked like a shimmering cliff with jagged spires upstanding in a row.

"Vivian—everything's gone—the Radaks—we're not where we were—Bob and Shorty—gone—"

The red glow in a moment had brightened to be far more luminous than they remembered it in the caverns. Obviously there was a sky overhead now—a lurid, murky, blood-red haze of infinite distance. This was the outer surface of the little planetoid. The Realm of the Deathless Monsters! Mack realized it with a shudder of terror. He and Vivian now could see that they were standing upon a little rise of ground, in what could have been called a forest. Everywhere great stalks of spindly blue and grey vegetation towered into the air. Growing things of fantastic shape, woven in places to be a solid jungle. Or again there were open glades of rocky ground—boulders and little spires, small ravines and crevices. All of it bathed in crimson, as though here were a bloody landscape of unutterable horror. The horror of things not yet seen . . . things lurking—

"Oh Pete, what can we do?" Hungry and faint she swayed against him. But in the blood-red light she was trying to smile.



"You tell us what we ought to do—I will help us do it, Pete. I'm not—not afraid."

But the terror of despair was clutching at both of them. Mack tried to gather his wits. Alone here on an alien world. Could they find food and drink? Wander here, until some ghastly monster engulfed them? Or should they try to get back underground? Why? To have the murderous Radaks fall upon them and kill them?

But the will to live in every human is very strong. No one will lie down and just hopelessly wait for death.

"Viv—those cliffs over there—cliffs with the spires—there ought to be tunnels maybe at the bottom of them. If we could get back—maybe get to Bob and Shorty—" His voice trailed away. It all seemed so hopeless.

Then he felt the girl clutch at his arm. "Look! Maybe that's water? I'm so thirsty—"

"I see it. Maybe it is. Come on."

In a nearby open glade, surrounded by stalks of the towering fibrous vegetation, what could have been a shallow pool of water was spread on the open rocks. A little pool, twenty feet or so in diameter. Rivulets extended off to the sides of it in crevices of the rock-surfaces. It was quite shallow, seemingly only a few inches deep. The red radiant glow that suffused everything stained it like blood, but it was translucent so that the rocks showed through it.

Was it water? As they approached, Vivian stepped over one of the branching

rivulet arms. The translucent red stuff suddenly lifted from the rocks, the little tentacle arm of it wrapping itself around her ankle!

**T**HE GIRL screamed. In a panic Mack reached down, plucking at the red mass. Ghastly horror! It was like quivering, sticky glue. Frantically he tore at it. Warm, pulsating, protoplasm. It stuck to his fingers, greedily fastening upon his flesh until he wiped it away. Vivian, too, was frantically flailing at the stuff. And in that second Mack was aware that the whole twenty-foot spread of it on the rocks was in motion now—rolling itself up from the rocks, congealing, gathering itself into a great circular mass. Huge, eight-foot ball of blood-red, pulsating protoplasm. Yet now it seemed there was a nucleus, a little central part, more solid than the rest, suddenly growing to look almost like a head and face in the center of the mass. Red-gleaming eyes; a sucking mouth, yawning.

All this Mack saw in a horrified second or two while still he was flailing to cast away the broken, pulpy arm of the monster. And he saw now that the great ball of it was rocking. Then it started to roll and bump toward them!

"Vivian! Run—good Lord, here it comes!"

They fled. But behind them it was coming, gathering speed, bumping and squishing over the rocks. Mack tried to



keep his wits. The monstrous thing was only twenty feet behind them now. And as it rolled, it was expanding. A lashing ball twice as high as their heads. Then ahead of them Mack saw a narrow pass between two huge rocks—a space some three feet wide. He shoved Vivian into it—a space too small for the monster to follow. It was a crevice only some ten feet long. They dashed through it.

Mack turned to see what the crimson Deathless Thing would do. It had hit the rocks, and now it was oozing through the narrow space—thin red streamer of protoplasm feeding itself through the crevice. Mack and Vivian had fled to one side, and as the jet of red pulp came through, out on the other side it rolled itself again into a ball—ghastly thing that kept on going down the slope! In a moment it was a hundred feet away. Panting, Mack clutched his companion and they stared. The bumping, rolling circular mass had reached a patch of forest. It slowed; stopped.

"Pete, look!" The girl's terrified, awed voice murmured it. "Look at it now!"

There in the forest glade the monstrous crimson ball was sagging, flattening, spreading itself out into a thin, translucent layer on the rocky ground. Then it was motionless, quiescent, waiting.

"Well!" Mack breathed. "At least we know now what to avoid! We—"

But again Vivian gripped him. "What's that over there?" Her shaking hand gestured to one side. It was an upright blob moving in a patch of trees. A tree hid it; then it showed again. It stopped, seemed to turn upon itself. Still upright. Then again it moved.

Suddenly Mack gasped, "A man! Look—see it now—a man—why—why it's Blaine!"

Startled relief was in his voice. The figure came to another open space, where the crimson glow in the air showed it plainly. It was Blaine. He was moving along, gazing around as though searching.

"Blaine! Blaine!" Mack called.

The banker turned at the voice; saw Mack and Vivian who now were running toward him. "You Mack—Vivian—you're safe—"

"Yes, sure!" It was a blessed relief to Mack.

"I've been looking for you," Blaine called. He was running to meet them. "And I've got something—something important! A weapon—"

The three reached each other. Blaine and Mack gripped hands. Then suddenly Vivian gasped: "Another! Another of those Things—"

Out among the trees beyond where Blaine had been a moment before, a slithering red shape was visible. Another of the Deathless Things which soundlessly had been stalking Blaine. Like a huge thirty-foot crimson python it was sliding through the vegetation. Its neck and head came up, reared up as for a second it stopped, peering with red-green eyes seeking its prey. Then it lowered its head and came slithering rapidly forward!

I MUST go back now for just a moment to recount what had happened to Blaine, from that moment when the Radak guards hustled him away from their shriveled ancient ruler. Ignoring his protests, he was shoved along a corridor, thrown into a cave-cell and its door-slide closed upon him. But he wasn't alone there for long. Presently the slide opened again and a figure came in. It was obviously a Radak, but of somewhat a different type. The same square, powerful look. But this one was taller, almost as tall as Blaine. Grey-skinned, lean and muscular. He seemed fairly young, thirty Earth-years perhaps.

"I have come for to talk to you," the visitor announced. He sat stiffly on a rock by a wall of the cave. His grey-black woven garment swished as he motioned Blaine to sit on the ground before him. "You are very interesting to me. Sit down."

"Thanks. I'll stand," Blaine said. "You speak my language very well."

"That I should." The Radak's smile made his strange face wrinkle into a grimace. "I am Ratan. Our Great Mind sent me to your Earth. I picked you Earthmen, and ordered you seized. I will tell you about that. You can be very helpful to us, I am thinking. Perhaps especially so. I am commanded to tell you our plans."

Carefully Blaine listened to the strange things this Ratan quite calmly was telling



him. With their weird mechanisms, the Radaks now were directing their tiny world through Space, toward our Earth. Already they were bathing Earth with a radiance which was disturbing the Earth's axial and orbital rotations—that vague, dim purple haze which Dr. Johns had described to Shorty and me. Then when Zelos was closer to Earth, the vibratory beam would be intensified.

The Earth would be drawn from its orbit. Engulfed in this weird gravitational force, it would follow Zelos back from the Sun—out into Interplanetary Space. . . . The abduction of the Earth! Blaine knew little of science, but enough to realize what soon would happen on Earth. . . .

"Storms—the disturbance of all your atmospheric pressures—" Ratan was saying with his ironic smile, "that will very soon kill many of your people. And then will come the congealing cold. Certain it is that human life on your Earth will not withstand it."

Our atmosphere, not adapted to insulate the cold of Space—

There was no need for this Ratan to picture for Blaine the wild devastation of Earth. "Perhaps even before we have drawn you out to the orbit of Saturn," Ratan was saying, "then there will be no Earthman still living."

The end of human Earth-life. It might take another Earth-year, or many. But it was coming. Inevitable. A thing that the Radak Great-Mind had long planned, and that already was being successfully accomplished. . . . There are on Earth now as I write this brief narrative, many scientists working to understand the theories of the strange, diabolic mechanisms of the bandit Crimson Comet. The projection of some new application of gravitational force. The purple ray was something of that nature, of course. A link between Zelos and Earth, like a chain binding them together—a powerful little tug pulling a great ocean liner. And the same force unquestionably was what made Zelos itself mobile in Space. That much we know definitely because in miniature, but doubtless of the same approximate nature, the purple gravitational ray is the motive power for the Radak Space-ship which we now have intact.

"So you are planning to kill everyone on Earth," Blaine said. His heart was pounding, but he tried to hold his voice calm. He stood with folded arms, gazing at Ratan. "And what will that gain you?"

"Our little planet here we do not like," Ratan retorted. "Many space-ships we will build, and when your Earth-people are gone, then we will migrate to your much

better world. The Lei, and the Radaks to rule them. The Great Mind has planned it all. We have been secretly to your Earth, we have studied life there. It will be much better for us than this. The Great Mind will rule your whole world for a while—until he dies. And then—do you not see something unusual in me?"

"What?" Blaine demanded.

"I am the appointed one to be the next Great Mind. When I was born it was decided. I have been trained for that. Just for that, nothing else."

**B**LAINÉ could see it in him now. That air of quiet, confident dominance. "I see what you mean," Blaine agreed. "I am like that, on Earth. You realize it?"

"It is why I chose to bring you here," Ratan said.

"I can be very helpful to you," Blaine added. "My companions—they are just captives. But I would like to be more than that." The banker shrugged. "I bow to the inevitable. If you are to seize my world, then I would like to do the best for myself. That's good sense, isn't it?"

Was he gaining this fellow's confidence? The big Radak smiled also. "What do you mean?"

"On Earth I am very powerful. I have money, property."

"Of what good could that be to me?" Ratan smiled. "And when I get there—I have it all anyway."

"What I mean," Blaine persisted, "I am an organizer. I know the resources of Earth—"

"And to that I agree," Ratan interrupted. "You mean, you would join us, as a friend."

"For a position of power among you Radaks, yes. You will find I can handle the Lei." He smiled cannily. "On Earth they called me ruthless. I could bend men to my will—and always to my own profit."

Blaine's keen, appraising gaze was watching the Radak. Ratan was smiling; he could understand talk like this, and it was obvious that he liked it. . . . Blaine's heart was pounding. At Ratan's broad grey belt a little pot-bellied metal cylinder was hanging. He gestured to it casually.

"What is that, Ratan?"

"That? It is a weapon of ours. Very

important. There are only very few of us who may carry it. A Rak-gun, perhaps your language would term it."

"Let me see it. How does it work?"

But Ratan was only fingering it lovingly. He made no move to detach it from his belt. He was smiling. "It is what brought you from Earth."

He seemed willing enough to describe it. The projection of a vibration akin to thought-waves, but infinitely more intense. In effect it paralyzed the conscious mind, yet left the motor area intact. The victim, to all intents and purposes was a somnambulist. The subconscious mind, with will power numbed, then was open to any suggestive stimulus which it received. The victim's muscles instinctively obeyed commands. And the memory areas recorded nothing. Shorty and I had seen it happen to Vivian and Mack. Blaine did not know of that. But it had happened to him, on Earth, as it had to all of us.

"And, then, after a time it wears off?"

"Exactly. An hour—what you would call an hour on Earth, perhaps. But another shock of it can be given. You were under its influence for about three weeks—the time it took for our Space-ship to bring us here."

"And you fed me very badly," Blaine commented. He was taut inside now. He took a casual step forward so that he was almost within reach of the seated Radak. "Is that thing easy to operate?"

Blaine's heart leaped as Ratan unclipped the little cylinder from his belt. "Very simple," the Radak said. "Just a pressure on this little lever. But it will be years before the Great Mind or myself would let you handle one of these."

"I was thinking," Blaine said, "when we get to Earth you yourself will not be the Great Ruler. But if, perhaps, the Great Mind should suddenly die? Then it would be only the great Ratan, with me to help him—" Blaine had leaned forward confidentially and lowered his voice. "Did you ever think of that?"

Surely at least the idea of murdering his commander was startling to Ratan, and for that instant he was off his guard. Just a second, but it was enough for Blaine. The banker abruptly reached, snatched the cylinder and leaped backward.

"Now you damned villain—"

**B**LAINE raised the cylinder level. With a roar, Ratan was on his feet. There was a soundless, vague little flash. Ratan, tensing his muscles for a leap abruptly relaxed, wavered.

"Quiet now! Stand still!" Blaine ordered sharply.

He stood listening, with the quiescent, blankly staring Ratan before him. Had Ratan's roar of startled anger aroused any guards out in the corridor? It seemed not. There was only silence.

"Now we will go out of here," Blaine said softly. "We will go out. You know where Robert Rance is now. You will lead me to him."

With hands outstretched, the big Radak moved to the door, slid it open. At this moment Shorty and I were confined in another cave-cell not far away. Ratan knew it; he was leading Blaine there. But suddenly, at a corridor intersection, voices sounded! Radaks were coming.

"Crouch down!" Blaine commanded. "Be quiet! Not a sound from you!"

There was a wall recess. Blaine shoved his numbed captive into it. Together they crouched. And now Blaine saw that in a sheath at Ratan's belt, there was a knife. He drew it out; held it in his other hand and kept the cylinder ready. Two Radaks were coming. They were talking together in their own language. They stopped nearby, evidently with the intention of parting here at the intersection.

Blaine listened. Then he whispered to Ratan: "Answer me softly. What are they saying? Tell me in English."

"Those Earth-people banished—into the Realm of—Deathless—Monsters—and they will die—of course." Ratan's words were mumbled, queerly mouthed, like one who talks in his sleep. Blaine assumed that all of us were out there on the upper surface, not just Vivian and Mack. Swiftly he changed his plans.

"In a moment when I command you," he whispered, "you will lead me there. You know where the Earth-people would probably be now? Out which exit they went? Answer me—softly."

"By the—big cliff with the—rock spires. . . . The exit is—down this left corridor."

Tensely Blaine waited. The nearby Radaks parted and moved away. "Now, lead me," he whispered.

Again they moved forward, down the left-hand corridor-branch now. And suddenly behind Blaine there was a shout. He whirled. One of the Radaks had changed his mind and was coming back, calling something to his fellow. Blaine had no time to get himself and Ratan out of sight. The Radak saw them—saw the stiffly walking Ratan, and Blaine with the cylinder in his hand.

With a startled shout, the little Radak leaped at Blaine. The flash met him; he stopped in his tracks, stood stiff. But from the other direction, his companion was coming. And now the commotion was bringing others. Blaine could hear several of the guttural voices and the thuds of their oncoming footsteps.

With a leap Blaine went past Ratan. The squat little shape of the other Radak came charging down the center of the narrow corridor. His greenish eye-beams were weird in the crimson gloom. Again Blaine fired his cylinder. But this time evidently he missed and in another second the Radak was on him. The shock of the impact flung them both to the ground. The cylinder was knocked from Blaine's hand. He felt his adversary's arms clutching him, squeezing him with machine-like strength. In another moment Blaine's ribs would have smashed. But his left hand still gripped the knife. With despairing effort he drove it into the Radak's side.

Ghastly knife-thrust! It went in with a crunch, a rasp as it severed the strange flesh. There was a hiss as hot fluid spurted. The Radak's scream was horrible. His arms fell away. Blaine disentangled himself. On the ground near him he saw the cylinder, snatched it, dropped it into his pocket. A commotion was all around him now. Oncoming Radaks in several of the branching corridors. But ahead of Blaine there seemed no one.

He ran. Behind him he could dimly see the squat little figures gazing at their dead fellow, and surrounding the stricken Ratan. No one seemed to notice the fleeing Blaine as he ran the length of the winding corridor until at last he was out upon the crimson upper surface.

For a time he wandered. He did not see any of the crimson monsters, or at least did not recognize them for what they were.

Then he heard Mack shouting at him; saw Mack and Vivian running toward him.

"I've got something important — a weapon," he called to Mack.

Then abruptly the three of them saw that huge, python-like crimson Thing which had been silently stalking Blaine.

"Look!" Vivian gasped. "Another of them!"

It was slithering rapidly at them now, no more than fifty feet away. Its green-swaying eye-beams clung to them. For that instant they were standing stricken with terror. To one side of them there was the brink of an abyss a few yards away, and to the other, and behind them, a ragged little cliff.

"Got to try and climb those rocks!" Mack gasped. "Can't get past that snake thing—we're trapped—"

But Blaine swept him aside. The cylinder was in Blaine's hand now. "This will stop it!" he muttered. "You two—get behind me!"

The monstrous thirty-foot thing was only half its own length away from them now. Then, as its head reared over a projection of the uneven, rocky ground, Blaine carefully aimed the cylinder and fired. But the monster didn't stop! There was no conscious, thinking brain in that ghastly, pulsating crimson head! Just motor-ganglia reacting to the impulses of instinct!

Blaine fired again. But the monster kept on coming and in another second was upon them!

#### IV

BACK in our cave-cell, Shorty and I stared blankly after the figure of the Lei woman, Tahn, as she motioned to the Radak guards who slid our door-panel closed. Again we were alone.

"Well," Shorty murmured. "What do you make of that? The wife of some Lei named Taro, she said."

And that she would come back and try to get us out of here. That her husband had some plan—

Eagerly, Shorty and I waited. Would it be an hour, or a day? Both of us were thinking of Blaine, locked somewhere around here, perhaps in a cell like ours. Or had the Radaks killed him by

now? And Vivian and Mack, wandering out there in the Realm of the Things you couldn't kill.

"Guess they're done for," Shorty said, when I mentioned them.

"Unless we can get out there to them—"

Shorty's smile was ironic. "That would fix everything, of course. Don't be an ass, Bob. If we were out there, we'd all be trying to get back. For what? So the Radaks would jump on us and kill us."

It was all so utterly hopeless. But it was queer, that instinct all five of us had, to try and keep together.

The young Lei woman had brought us food and drink. Shorty and I slumped on the earthen floor now and sampled the food. Nauseous stuff, indescribable.

"If it's been weeks since we left the Earth," Shorty said, "no wonder we're nearly starved to death."

But we managed to eat and drink some of it, and then exhausted by the nerve tension of what we had been through, we drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

The rasp of the sliding door-panel jerked us into alertness. I had the feeling that only a little time had passed. The panel slid open just a foot or two, and a figure came in. It was Tahn.

Both Shorty and I were on our feet. "You came as you hoped," I said softly. "We're ready. Just tell us what you want us to do."

She barely whispered, "The Radak guards just now are changing. There is no one outside. We go, quickly."

"Go where?" Shorty demanded.

"To my husband, Taro. He is in a corridor near here. Come now, quickly."

The faintly red corridor outside was empty. Swiftly Tahn led us along it, around several sharp bends, past a cross-corridor intersection. I was tense, expecting every moment that Radaks would leap upon us from the shadows. But so far we had escaped notice, though obviously there were many Radaks near here. Several times we passed the dim oval openings of little grottos, and often there were guttural, chattering voices from within them.

"Won't the guards discover we're gone?" Shorty murmured.

"Perhaps not for maybe much time.

I am in charge of you, I bring you food and drink. The guards stay outside, should you try to break out."

Our tunnel was descending now. And suddenly from the dimness to one side, there came a murmur: "Tahn! Tahn—"

A young Lei man was crouching in a shadowed recess. It was Tahn's husband, Taro.

"She has brought you, Earthmen. That is good."

We crouched down with him. He was a youngish fellow, tall, slim and powerfully built. His single draped garment exposed one bronze shoulder. His grey-black hair was chopped at the base of his neck, with a narrow band of bright-colored fabric tied around his forehead. With his high-cheek bones, hawk-like nose and gleaming dark eyes he could have been a stalwart young savage of Earth.

"I want to help you," he was saying. "Your coming here fits my plans, and believe me I have worked on them a long time. Tahn and I, making the Radaks trust us."

"Say," Shorty murmured, "you certainly are fluent with English."

The young Lei's face wrinkled into a snile. "Why should I not, my wife and I? We Lei learn things quickly. Perhaps a different mind-quality from yours, almost at once to absorb what we hear. Ratan—he is next to the Great Mind as leader of the Radaks—he chose Tahn and me to go on the expedition to Earth. We were carefully watched, or we would have escaped to warn you. It was Tahn who took care of you on the way here."

**H**E TOLD us then of the weird Radak-gun, with its flash of mind-current—the weapon which probably just at this exact moment no more than half a mile away in this maze of subterranean corridors, Blaine was snatching from Ratan. . . . And Tahn told us, too, of the Radak plot to devastate Earth.

"You have some plan?" Shorty murmured.

He told us then that he knew how to get into the Cavern of Machines—a huge, guarded grotto where all the diabolic, giant mechanisms of the Radaks were housed. The power plant of little Zelos,

and the source of the purple radiance which was bathing Earth.

"If we can kill the guards and get into the Cavern—only the Great Mind himself—or Ratan—will be there. No one else but those two are allowed there. No one else knows the secrets of the mechanisms to operate them."

"So we just get in and overcome the Great Mind himself," Shorty commented. He gave a mock shudder with an attempt to be humorous. "All right. Figure that's done. Then what?"

Taro's plan was certainly desperate, but at least it promised the possibility of success. "Do you know where the Earthman Blaine is?" I demanded.

Tahn said, "He is in a cave-cell. I am ordered to take him food and drink very soon."

"What weapons have you got?" Shorty asked. "Say, if you could get one of those brain-paralyzing guns—"

Taro shook his head. "Never could I even get near one. The Great Mind always carries one—and so does Ratan. But there is no chance—"

"We must get to Blaine," I said. "And then try and find Vivian and Mack. We've all got to be together—"

We planned it for a few moments more. Then cautiously Taro and Tahn led us to a corridor intersection. "We will hide here," he said, gesturing to another shadowed recess where the ragged rocks of the wall jutted out in an overhang. "Tahn can go best." The young Lei turned to his wife. "Tahn, listen. You get food and drink. You take it to Blaine's cell. There are not always guards perhaps. You watch your chance—"

"Listen!" Shorty suddenly interjected. "Maybe I'm crazy, but there's some kind of commotion around here."

We could all hear it now—a distant murmur of turmoil down one of the side corridors. Taro nodded. "Something is wrong. And Blaine's cell is down that way. You Earthmen wait here! I will go with Tahn. Then we come back to you."

**T**HEY were gone only a few moments. From a little distance they had stood unnoticed, watching and listening. Blaine had escaped! He had seized Ratan's



thought-gun; turned it upon Ratan and one of the guards; had stricken them. And had knifed another guard, and vanished.

"Well! Good for Blaine," Shorty murmured. "He's smarter than all the rest of us put together! And he's got one of those guns! Where'd he go—"

"They think perhaps out to the outer surface," Taro said. "He ran that way."

"To find Mack and Vivian!" I exclaimed. "Well, that's what we want to do. Show us that exit, Taro."

"I will go with you," the young Lei said quietly. But there was no mistaking his shudder and the grim look on his face. "Tahn, you stay here."

"I will go with my husband," she retorted. "Taro, please—"

We took her. It seemed that the commotion at Blaine's cell must have drawn all the Radaks from these other passages. We were not discovered as we threaded our way back, until presently we were ascending a winding tunnel which ended at the crimson upper surface. How long it took us to sight Mack, Vivian and Blaine I do not know. It seemed an eternity of apprehension, as Taro and Tahn cautiously led us along winding rocky defiles and past patches of that weird, fantastic forest. Shorty and I saw none of the monsters. But there were many times when suddenly, without explanation, Taro turned us from where we would have wandered.

Then we were far enough from the tunnel entrances so that we dared talk without possibility that the Radaks would hear us.

"Blaine! Blaine—where are you?"

"Mack! Vivian—are you here?"

It was Tahn who first saw them. We were in a cluster of rocks with a brink ahead of us. I could see lower ground perhaps fifty feet down—a precipitous descent close ahead of us. It chanced that Tahn was leading, and suddenly she turned, gave a cry, and then pointed over the brink.

"There they are! Down there! Look—look at them—"

We crowded to the brink. Fifty feet down this ragged wall, Blaine, Vivian and Mack stood backed against it. An abyss was near them. And in front of them a great crimson, python-like thing was

slithering, almost upon them now, with Blaine futilely firing his gun at it!

There was nothing we could do; and for those seconds all four of us stood staring, mute, numbed with horror. The scene on the ledge below us was clear as though on a little stage. The monster in another second would be upon its victims. I saw Blaine throw down his gun in despair. His voice floated up to us.

"Damn thing won't work! Got to—try to run—"

Then, suddenly we saw Mack leap forward, not toward where he might have a wild chance of climbing up our ragged little cliff-wall, but the other way—toward the brink that dropped down to another terrace, between the brink and the monster's slithering length. His intention was obvious—to lead the monster over that other brink after him. . . . To sacrifice himself so that his companions might escape.

In the chaos of that second we saw Mack get past the monster's head and neck. Its head turned. And then, before Mack could hurl himself down the hundred-foot drop, a loop of the great crimson body lashed out. It seemed that a tentacle whipped separate from the undulating snake-like body—a tentacle that seized Mack, looped around him and flung him into the air.

Just a ghastly second or two as Mack's whirling body came up diagonally toward us in the air, and then fell back, into a ragged cluster of rocks beyond the monster's tail. Horribly we could hear the thud as it struck. For another second the great crimson head of the monster seemed to rear, with swaying eye-beams searching. But Mack's body was hidden by the rock-cluster.

THEN, suddenly the gruesome python shape, head down, began oozing over the brink beside it. Flowing mass of protoplasm. It thinned out as it sagged down the hundred-foot drop—thinned until it was a narrow ribbon—a blood-red rivulet of waterfall. Then it was all on the lower level, gathering itself together until in a moment it was a great congealed, quivering crimson ball with the head in the center. For another instant it pulsed; then it bumped and rolled down a



ragged slope, reached a little patch of distant vegetation where we could dimly see it spreading itself thinly out. . . . Spread like a blood-red pool, quiescent, waiting.

With Taro and Tahn, Shorty and I climbed down the ragged little descent, joined Vivian and Blaine.

"He tried to save us," the white-faced Vivian murmured.

"Yes," I agreed. "We saw it."

We found his broken body in the cluster of rocks fifty feet away. He was still conscious but we thought he was dying. One of his arms hung limp. Blood was coming from a head wound. But his pallid face was trying to smile.

"My leg and arm," he mumbled. "Can't move them."

One of his legs undoubtedly was broken. As we told him that the monster had gone his gaze seemed only on Vivian.

"Thought it would kill you, Viv," he muttered. "Didn't want that." Then he fainted. He had been trying to get up on one elbow as Vivian knelt with an arm under his head. Then his eyes closed, and he sagged, went limp.

"We must stop that blood from his head," Tahn murmured. "And then try and get him into one of the tunnels."

Vivian jumped up. "Here's what we need—bandages." She flashed us a little twisted smile as she tore off her waist and

skirt and ripped them into strips. "Here—bandages." She handed the strips of fabric to Tahn. Then she grinned at me. "This underdress—not too becoming, is it?" She gestured at the brief undergarment that now partly covered her, and her whimsical smile broadened. "Well this time, anyway, I had a good motive, didn't I?"

Shortly and I carried the still unconscious Mack back to one of the tunnel entrances. And Taro led us to a shadowed, cave-like little place where we laid him down. Good luck seemed with us. We had encountered, so far, no Radaks.

"You and Tahn will stay with him," I told Vivian. And Shorty and I had decided that Blaine had best stay also. For once Blaine had to do something against his will.

"Think I'm too old to help you young fellows now?" he said. "All right, maybe I am."

Certainly he was in no physical condition to be much help in the desperate venture we were planning. He handed me the Radak-gun, showed me how to use it. I dropped it in my pocket.

"Good luck to you," Blaine said.

"Thanks. We'll need it," I acknowledged.

Then Shorty, Taro and I left them. Taro had hidden the only weapons he

could get, near here. We found them—sheathed knives that the Lei used in the underground fields. They were odd-shaped knives; they seemed made of a highly polished, metallic stone. I thumbed one. It was sharp.

"Very handy," Shorty commented. "Come on, Taro, let's go. Where is this Cavern of Machines?"

It was perhaps half an Earth-mile, low down in the maze of underground passages. Shorty clutched his knife; I held the Radak-gun as we followed Taro down the dim, descending crimson tunnel.

## V

"THERE'S one of the guards!" Shorty whispered. "See him?"

I pushed Shorty back. "No, two of them! The other one's sitting down. You and Taro keep behind me. I'll tackle them with the Radak-gun."

We could see the square grey figures of two Radaks down the little length of tunnel ahead of us. They were by an opening that seemed to lead sharply downward, with a glow of radiance streaming up. And now in the heavy underground silence we could hear the faint muffled thrum and whine of mechanisms.

My hand silently gripped Taro. All three of us crouched. "That's the entrance to the Cavern of Machines?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Two guards. Are there liable to be more of them around?"

Taro shook his head. "I think not. Though I cannot surely say."

"The machines are operating," Shorty said. "Hear them? That means only the Great Mind, or Ratan will be down there in the Cavern?"

"Yes," the young Lei agreed.

"It's most likely not Ratan," I said. "Blaine got him—struck him insensible. Or would he be recovered by now?"

Taro had no way of guessing. With an ordinary Radak the shock would have lasted longer than this. "But Ratan's mind is trained—developed—more powerful as you would say. He could recover more quickly."

"Are there other entrances?" Shorty asked. "They'd have guards at them.

If we make any commotion down there, and a bunch of Radaks come rushing us—"

"This is the only entrance."

"Right," Shorty chuckled. "Come on then, let's finish off these fellows." He fingered his knife. "You tackle 'em with that gun, Bob. But if you miss, trust me—I'll slip this knife into them—"

With Taro and Shorty behind me I crept soundlessly forward. In my hand the pot bellied little Radak gun, so unfamiliar, gave me an uneasy feeling. Suppose I should miss. An uproar from these guards might bring dozens of others.

"How close do I have to get?" I whispered to Taro.

"This now—close enough."

One of the Radaks was standing up, lounging with his back to the wall. The other was lying down. To send my flash clinging to the heads of both of them, I would have to shift my aim, and fire twice. My hand trembled a little. Then I pressed the lever.

There was that vaguely visible flash. The gun-hilt in my grip vibrated, and at the muzzle of it there was a faint little hiss. A hit! The Radak on the ground seemed to stiffen. He raised his head, staring blankly. The Radak who was standing noticed it. He started, whirled around toward us. It took all my will power to withhold my second flash for that instant. But I did; and then as the standing figure steadied, I fired again.

"Got him!" Shorty murmured. "Good work, Bob! Come on!"

We ran forward. The standing Radak was motionless, gazing with vacant stare. Shorty dashed up to him. "Lie down, you're asleep! If you're not, you ought to be."

But the Radak did not move, just turned his empty gaze toward the sound of Shorty's voice. I got it. "They don't speak English! Tell them, Taro."

The Lei murmured commandingly in his own language, and in a moment the two guards were lying inert with closed eyes.

"Mighty neat," Shorty whispered. "Come on—here we go."

Beyond the guards an earthen ramp led sleepily downward, winding to a

circular spiral. Then presently we emerged upon a little ledge with the great Cavern of Machines spread out before us.

"Crouch down! We will see who is here," Taro whispered. There was awe in his voice. "We must not be seen until we attack."

It was a huge, vault-like cavern, with glowing roof high over our heads, and we were about twenty feet above its lower level, with a narrow, steep ramp leading down from near us. I saw that it was a weird, dim grotto, lurid with swaying, prismatic glows of colored radiance, and throbbing, humming with a myriad mechanical voices. Distant railed terraces held frameworks of metal, where opalescent tubes were glowing. Beams of light-radiance seemed to carry the power from one strange mechanism to the next, like wires connecting them in series. No Lei, no ordinary Radak, and certainly least of all us Earthmen, could by any chance have understood the scientific details of what we were seeing.

I recall there was a convergence of beams, high up in mid-air at the center of the cavern, where a shower of tiny electrolyte sparks glittered like a fountain of pyrotechnics. And out of it a narrow concentrated beam of violet-purple glow shot upward to a grid in the ceiling—the gravitational force, doubtless, which from there was conducted to some point above where it was hurled into Space.

How long I stared, awed, I have no idea. Then I was aware of Taro beside me, whispering, "It is the Great Mind who is down there. He has just come into sight—down by that yellow glow."

The floor of the cavern held a dozen or more of the huge mechanisms, and in the center of them there was a throbbing space that seemed to hold the controls of all these intricate machines. Down there in the weird glow we could now see the lone figure of the ancient Radak leader—shriveled and bent, he moved around, occasionally reaching to shift some lever or make some adjustment.

"He must not see us coming!" Taro whispered. His voice was tense. And on his face now as the multi-colored glow bathed it, there was unmistakable terror. This young Lei, like all his people, born and bred to fear the dominance of the

Great Mind—to attack that little figure, to Taro was almost unthinkable. Taro had planned this; dreamed of it. But faced with it now, there was only terror sweeping him, so that had he been here alone, easily he could have turned and fled.

Shorty and I had no such inhibitions.

"What in the devil," Shorty murmured. "He's got a Radak-gun—sure, I've no doubt of it. We've got to duck that. But once I get close to him—" Shorty's gesture with his knife was significant.

For minutes more we tensely waited. Then we got down the ramp without being seen, and on the lower floor we crouched between two of the giant whining machines.

"Easy now!" I whispered. "You two—keep behind me—"

I held the Radak-gun in my hand. We waited another moment; then ducked forward and crouched again, behind a great glowing mechanism through which two beams of colored light were passing. We were only some twenty feet from the leader now. Close enough for my shot, or for us to rush him. He was bending down over a glowing dial. Green light from it streamed upward, bathed his weird mummy-like countenance so that suddenly he seemed like some horrible ghoul intent upon a task diabolic, gruesome.

"Let him have it!" Shorty whispered. "Now's your chance!"

I must confess my heart was racing, with a sudden nameless premonition of terror. Thoughts are instant things. I tried to tell myself that this was just a weazened old man. Helpless, with three of us about to leap on him. Of course he was helpless! With sudden relief I saw that he had discarded his belt. It hung on the peg of a rack, several feet away from him—his belt, with his Radak-gun! Shorty saw it at the same instant.

"There's his gun, Bob! He can't reach it! We've got him!"

Of course . . . I leveled my weapon. I was sighting it . . . I shall always wonder if my racing thoughts were projected then to warn the Radak leader. Or did he sense us in some other way? I was standing a little out into an aisle between two big mechanisms when suddenly he lifted his head, turned and saw me. The movement, and my own startled reaction, spoiled my aim . . . Mustn't fire until I was sure. . . .

I recall that in that split-second I was aware that the old Radak had not moved. He was just staring at me with glittering eyes and his shrunken grey face horrible with the intensity of his menace. He knew of course that he couldn't reach his weapon. He didn't try. . . .

**J**UST a helpless, weazened old man. But as I sighted my gun I was aware of the power radiating from him. The power of his mind, pitted now against mine; his will commanding me to drop my weapon and my own brain demanding my muscles to sight it, to fire it. Conflict most horrible. It was as though every fibre of me was being outraged, seared and torn. My nerves screaming. . . . And my mind was screaming—kill him! Got to kill him now! . . . Don't drop the gun! Hold your fingers tight!

But I could feel my fingers loosening their grip. The muzzle was swaying. Everything seemed blurring before me, swimming into a phantasmagoria of horror. . . . It was all in a second or two. I heard Shorty mutter a startled oath beside me. But it was Taro, despite that he must have been unutterably frightened, who kept his wits. He uttered a grim shout, jumped to his feet, sidewise away from me.

It did what Taro had hoped. For just an instant that baleful gaze left me, fastened on Taro. Then it swung back—but in that instant I had recovered myself, leveled the gun and fired.

New horror! The Radak leader's gaze, again on me, seemed to meet the flash of my gun in mid-air between us. I could imagine there must have been a conflict there—a little almost soundless, almost invisible puff of deranged vibrations. And the derangement must have been forced backward to me. All in the flash of a thought. To my conscious mind there was only my pressing the gun-lever, and then a bursting explosion at my hand as the Radak-gun flew into fragments! One of them struck my forehead; I staggered back, went down. But I was aware that Shorty, with Taro close after him, had leaped—Shorty, with knife upraised, his catapulting body hitting the crouching, ghoul-like figure.

Shorty thinks now his knife never reached its mark. There was just the im-

pact of his body, knocking the weazened figure backward. The Radak screamed a shrill, weirdly horrible cry. But it ended in a gurgle—just for an instant, a gruesome, liquid gurgle. Then there was only Shorty's gasp of horror.

I was scrambling to my feet, I crouched, stricken, staring. Shorty had drawn back, standing staring. And Taro too had checked his rush. All three of us, frozen with revulsion. On the floor, weird in a green-red glow from a nearby machine, the weazened, mummy body of the Radak lay huddled. A thing which had been nearly all of mental quality. And now it had encountered a physical blow, to which every atom of its weird make-up was foreign.

And what a second before had been living, solid substance now was dissolving! The clothes sagged, deflated. A bubbling ooze was where the face had been. Just a brief moment, and then before us the Radak's garments lay crumpled and flat in a little pool of stenching putrescence!

I turned away, sickened. Then Shorty recovered himself. "It—that damned thing screamed! Others will come—"

"Hurry now! Smash the machines! It is what we came for—" Taro gasped.

I made a leap for the control panels; then stopped, whirled around. There was a cry from behind and above me. On a narrow, railed little balcony which connected with the ramp down which we had come, the figure of a Radak was standing! A tall grey shape! It was Ratan, though I did not know who it was then. He had a knife in his hand, and he was in the act of leaping over the rail to land upon me! I had no time to avoid him. His body came sprawling, landed on my shoulders, bore me down.

**S**IMULTANEOUSLY I was aware that Shorty and Taro were smashing at the control apparatus. It crackled, tinkled like breaking glass, with a huge flash of colored light and sparks that sent Shorty and Taro reeling backward, dazed so that they did not see what was happening to me. Then they were up, at it again, hurling broken fragments of the controls at the nearby grids, tubes and prisms. And in that same second, the multi-colored flash spread—deranged—weird current. Like burning powder-trains it leaped every-

where around the grotto. Puffs, sparks of fountain-glare, the hissing, whining, screeching of breaking machines. . . .

On the floor I struggled with Ratan on top of me. He had no gun—just a long, thin knife with polished blade that glittered as he tried to thrust it into my throat. My own knife was gone. I reached, clutched at the grey wrist, turning the knife so that it went past my throat. Then I heaved upward. In the struggle Ratan dropped his knife and neither of us could reach it. Locked together we rolled, pummeling, scrambling. Then I knew that I had him. My fist landed on his hawk-nosed grey face—a solid blow that made him scream with revulsion and pain.

Then I had heaved him off, staggered to my feet. I seemed to be in a cloud of yellow-green, choking, acrid vapour through which only dimly I could see Ratan struggling erect. And there was Shorty's voice:

"Bob! Bob, where are you? Got to get out of here! Taro—Taro—"

It seemed that somewhere near me, Taro was coughing, choking. Then I realized that the shape of Ratan was plunging at me through the heavy chemical smoke. I was swaying, but I squared off, hit him solidly in the face again. He went down, and I leaped on him, lifting his head and shoulders, then banging his head back against the corner of a mechanism-frame—pounding it again and again until suddenly I was aware that it had smashed and was dripping upon me.

With a shudder I cast the inert body away and leaped to my feet.

"Bob! Got to get out of here! Taro—" Shorty was still shouting.

Green-yellow vapour was swirling around me. Electrolyte flashes seemed everywhere—the whole grotto, an inferno of pyrotechnics. Then I saw the figure of Shorty staggering to help Taro from where he had fallen. I swayed and joined them.

"That ramp," I gasped. "Behind us! Come on—"

We tried to hold our breath as we staggered up the ramp. Then there seemed a little puff of breathable air. As we plunged into the exit tunnel, for an instant I turned. The big grotto was alive with swirling turgid smoke and flames and leaping, burst-

ing light-fire. And a bedlam of weird bursting sounds. The death of the monstrous Radak science, screaming with its agony of dissolution.

Coughing and choking, we ran up the tunnel, with the sounds and the glare fading behind us; and the pure air reviving us.

"All the Radaks will be after us," Shorty panted. "Faster, Taro!"

Distant cries were all around us in the maze of tunnels. The alarm was spreading everywhere. We saw a few plunging Radak shapes, but were able to avoid them.

Taro was leading us; I gripped him as we ran. "You say you know where they keep their space-flyer?"

"Yes. Not far from Blaine and the others."

Then we reached the girls and Blaine, who were crouching in that tunnel recess with the still unconscious Mack. Vivian and Tahn just stared at us white-faced, with little cries of relief.

Blaine gasped, "You did it!"

"We sure did," Shorty agreed. "Come on—the space-ship—"

"You and I—we'll carry Mack—" I said. Shorty nodded, and we lifted him.

Carrying Mack slowed us. But his emaciated body was light. In a moment I slung him over my shoulders, and with Shorty steadying him, we made better speed. It wasn't far, but there were Radak figures everywhere now. Weirdly, only one of them came near us. Shorty and Taro were ready to attack him. The squat little shape came plunging along a side tunnel, apparently heading for us. He seemed to be gibbering, mouthing, then screaming. But he ignored us, running, knife in hand, until he bashed himself into a rock, . . .

WE RAN ON, and then suddenly I realized that we had emerged into that huge underground space where first we had met the Great Mind. Taro ran toward a wall, found some hidden mechanism. I saw, in the crimson radiance, that by the wall a hundred yards or so away, a big slide had opened. A small, gleaming, pot-bellied cylinder was standing there. It came automatically out on rollers, and stopped in the open—a little thirty foot Space-flyer. And over it, high up, the



ceiling of the vast cavern seemed to have opened; the murky purple-red of the sky was up there.

All this I saw in those few seconds. But there was far more here. A turmoil of sounds and moving, milling figures. A scene of weird, ghastly horror so that for a moment I stood swaying with the limp body of Mack slung over my shoulders and my companions clustered around me. Down the slope where the little Lei village stood under the trees in the red gloom, a crowd of Lei were struggling. And everywhere among them, squat grey shapes of Radaks were plunging. . . . Radaks with knives and scimitar-like swords, and some with rock-chunks and bludgeons . . . Radaks screaming, running amok. I saw one lunge with a knife at a Lei woman. The knife went into her and she fell; and the Radak kept on going until he crashed into a tree.

The Great Mind was dead. Ratan, who might have taken his place, was dead. The Mental Force of all this little Radak world was gone. The Lei themselves had not been under its control. For generations they had been cowed, terrified into sullen obedience, but that was all. With the Radaks it was different. They were born, bred and trained to be automatons. To think what they were told to think. Mentally dominated, controlled so that the very essence of their mind was shaped and held together by their leader.

And now they had no leader! For them, there was nothing left but mental chaos, so that gibbering with the insanity of minds unhinged, they were plunging here in wild, unreasoning chaos, obeying their instinct to kill.

"My people—I must help them!" Taro's unutterable horror at last found voice. He would have plunged down the slope with his young wife after him. But Vivian seized Tahn, clung to her. I shouted at Shorty,

"Hold him! Don't let him go!"

Shorty hung on to him. "No, you don't!"

"You can't help them!" I protested. "And we can't operate the spaceship! You want Earth-people to help your world—got to get back there, we—"

The words died in my throat. We all saw that none of us could get to the Lei

now, even if we had tried. A group of a hundred or more of the screaming, gibbering Radaks had swept between us and the Lei village. But the way to the spaceship still seemed open. We ran for it. One of the Radaks, by chance perhaps, turned toward us; and all the ones near him, like sheep followed him. A horde of grey, maniac Things charging us. . . .

We got to the gleaming little cylinder with only an instant to spare—reached it, tumbled through its doorway. I laid Mack on the white grid of its floor. Shorty banged the door-slide, banged it as the bodies of the Radaks thudded against it. Taro ran for the controls and in another instant the little ship quivered and lifted.

There was a transparent bulls-eye window panel near me. For a second I had a glimpse of horrible, snarling, maniac faces pressed against it. Then they fell away; and in a moment we were out through the upper opening, slanting upward with the crimson surface of little Zelos dropping down. Then we were in space, with the brilliant, beautiful miracle of the Universe glittering around us. . . .

**I** THINK there is little more I need add. You have all heard and read, of course, of the events of this past year. The secret of space-flying! We have it now. Earth-scientists, studying the Radak ship, had no difficulty in constructing others far larger. Fortunately our Earth-materials proved adaptable; there was nothing vital that we lacked. Many large ships were swiftly built, and an armed force went to Zelos. Haste was necessary, as you will recall, for when the mechanisms of the Radaks were smashed, it was soon found that the Crimson Comet was plunging directly toward our Sun.

J. Walter Blaine wanted no publicity when he freely gave the millions necessary for the scientific research and the myriad activities which went into the building of the space-ships. You all offered your own donations, and they were refused only because Blaine felt he had earned the privilege of financing the enterprise. He wants me now to extend his thanks to you.

Our first expedition to Zelos was when, in its Sunward plunge, it had crossed our Earth-orbit and was at its closest point to us. And the expedition found that no

more than a thousand of the Lei had been killed by the maniac Radaks, who in those terrible hours after our departure, plunged around, screaming until they bashed themselves to destruction, or were killed by the Lei.

Taro and Tahn were with our first expedition to the doomed little world, and they stayed there throughout all the several trips of the many big ships which evacuated the Lei.

I am glad that it was finally decided not to bring the Lei here to Earth. They would have been just curiosities here; and then lost, whirled away into the maelstrom of our huge world. Surely it was the best of good fortune for them when our exploring ships found that Venus was uninhabited, and with conditions for life so propitious.

And now the Lei, with Taro and Tahn to lead them, are masters of a great world of their own. With the friendly world of Earth nearest to them. Surely we will prove a helpful, friendly, neighboring world, with no greedy thought of anything more than that.

Zelos is gone now. I was one of those who saw it go—that night about a month

ago. It was a little dot in the sky, with a great flaming streamer of the Sun licking upward as though eager to meet it. And then it was gone.

I recall the earnest solicitations of so many of you who prayed that Mack would get well. He wants me to thank you all again. I saw him only last week, in the little mountain home where he and Vivian went after their wedding trip. That astoundingly pretentious wedding they had—well, that was because Blaine insisted on doing it. He may insist again, if and when a layette is needed. I don't know about that. But Mack, who now has an executive position in one of Blaine's many industries, got their little house himself. He and Vivian remained firm on that.

And as I said at the beginning, you must see now that none of us are glamorous heroes. We're all at our regular jobs, with the Crimson Comet just a gruesome memory.

So now, kind friends—please forget us. Except me. I'm certainly no hero, but, well, I won't mind if you'll remember that I broadcast twice a week on subjects of Popular Astronomy—Station WANA—NYC.

## LESSON IN LOGISTICS:

### Mrs. Brown learns why she must use less paper!

WHEN Mrs. Brown asked Grocer White why he didn't wrap her loaf of bread in the usual paper bag, he gave her a mighty quick and important answer. He told her how much our armed forces need every kind of paper to wrap the invasion ammunition, weapons, foods and medical supplies in. And Mrs. Brown, of course, was equally quick to see the importance of paper conservation not only at the store but in the home. Now she carries a market basket or shopping bag to save precious paper bags. Not a single piece of paper is wasted at the Brown home. Magazines like this, for instance, are passed along when read. Mrs. Brown is sure doing her duty. Are You?

All the mogoazines in America, added together, USE only 5% of the nation's paper supply. Yet, out of this comparatively small amount, they are SAVING 450 million pounds this year and RELEASING it for vital war needs.



This advertisement contributed by this magazine and prepared by the War Advertising Council in cooperation with the War Production Board and the Office of War Information.

# MUTINY

by LARRY OFFENBECKER

**This mercy rocket was Rawson's first command; and his last, it seemed—for mutineers had taken over, then lost the ship in a quicksand pool.**



Illustrated by DOOLIN

CAPTAIN TODD RAWSON snapped angry eyes at the directional needle that indicated that his space ship the *Star Flight* was holding

steady to her course like a bullet. He had ordered differently.

He was savagely kicking back his chair when the televisior leaped into life.

"Calling the *Star Flight*," the control officer from Saturn intoned, "Calling the *Star Flight*."

Rawson clicked a switch, continued to glare at the directional needle. "Rawson—*Star Flight*." His voice was richly vibrant and charged with emotion. "Running into spatial storm. Must detour to tangent to course. Will be late."

"For God's sake!" The voice from Saturn was urgent. "The plague is wiping out the entire colony! Hurry!"

"We'll get the serum there! Out!"

Rawson glanced once more at the unwavering needle of the direction indicator, and he switched off the televisior with such abrupt force that he broke off the dial. He tore from his desk and tumbled like a Jupiter avalanche across the vibrating deck of the *Star Flight* into the rocket room. "Mr. Durk, I ordered the rockets reversed"

The crew men looked up, winking at each other. This was it!

Durk raised a short, blunt body like a Venusian alligator and lumbered to attention. His voice came in a hoarse growl.

"The Old Man—you young punks think you know everything! The old man would 'a' headed right into the storm!"

Captain Rawson flushed slightly and felt the tips of his ears turn hot as he stared at the man who was twenty years his senior—the man who had twenty-five years of experience in space flight.

"I'm the captain here," Rawson said in a voice as steady as the beat of the motors. "My commands are to be obeyed without question."

"Sure, now, you're the captain." Durk winked slyly at one of the crew. "You got a gold star and the fixings. But we ain't goin' to get ourselves killed on account o' something you learned in a book."

Surprisingly Rawson laughed, a deep-throated laugh, although he knew that he had to break this man or be broken himself. His words lashed out like a cat-o-nine tails at the senior officer.

"Mr. Durk, don't let your bitterness defeat your common sense. The old man knew all the tricks. You know them. But space navigation has advanced to a science. It requires more than rule of thumb knowledge."

"I ain't going to reverse the rockets!"

Rawson looked at the stolid faces of the space hardened crew. Veterans all. The underofficer's men.

WHEN HE SPOKE, Rawson's words came in smooth, clipped phrases. "Mr. Durk, I'll explain briefly why it would be fatal to head straight into the storm. The instruments indicate that the storm drift ahead of the ship is heavily charged with electrons. Our space ship is a charged body. Breaking the relation of the space ship and the drift down mathematically we have the equation

$$V \text{ equals } q/r$$

where V is the velocity of the ship and q the potential of the electronic charge in the center of the drift, and r the radius."

Rawson watched the underofficer's face grow longer and longer, but determinedly he continued.

"Should we head directly into the drift we will be up against the following law—the shorter the distance in which a given amount of work is done the greater the force that must be exerted. We will be stalled in the center of the drift. To avoid disaster, the direction of the drift must be at right angles at every point to the space ship. Do you follow?"

Mingled with the lack of comprehension in Durk's eyes was intense bitterness—bitterness over not being appointed captain of the *Star Flight* after the death of the previous chief officer, whom Durk affectionately called "the old man".

Durk was starting a growl deep down in his alligator throat when the situation was taken out of his hands by the immutable laws that Rawson had just expounded.

The vessel jerked with a huge shudder that threw Rawson and the rest of the crew off balance.

With a screech of metal the space ship picked up speed as it was drawn into the potential in the center of the drift as well as being pushed by the power of its rockets.

With greyhound leaps, Rawson tore toward the control dials and twisted the wheels of the gyroscope. The ship groaned and reeled. It refused to heed the control.

"Power! Reverse the power!" Rawson screeched into the intercom. "Reverse the rockets!"

He felt the instruments tremble under his hands like reeds. Suddenly the rockets went dead. Then as the crew reversed the power, they roared to life again.

The *Star Flight* jerked in a death struggle. The rockets rattled and screamed as if sand had been thrown into the atom chargers.

Slowly the ship turned over, tilting at right angles to the drift.

A blinding flash like a bolt of lightning flamed across the power panels. The lights suddenly died. The ship was in darkness.

Rawson tore at the emergency switches, got them under control. A banshee wail sounded throughout the *Star Flight*. "Emergency Emergency!"

In the darkness in back of him, Rawson heard the alligator bark of Underofficer Durk. "Ship out of control, eh? We're drifting, eh? See if your book learnin' 'll get yuh out o' this!"

Rawson turned, and his voice was icy. "Mr. Durk! Consider yourself under arrest!"

"Ha, ha, ha—"

Durk's laugh made the short hairs on Rawson's neck tingle. But Rawson snapped back in a voice that he tried to hold steady. "You're an excellent under-officer, Durk—when you obey commands. But you'll never be captain!"

THE SPACE SHIP was plunging forward like a running blindman, directly into the belt of minor planets.

"Aw—I got a right!" Durk cried bitterly. "Ain't I been second in command for ten years? I know all the ropes—"

"You lack training in science and mathematics. That's vital these days!"

"I'll be captain yet. Wait and see! Yah can't arrest me. The crew won't take your orders without my say-so. And yah can't report me. It's yore word against me and the crew!"

Rawson lifted his chin courageously. He knew Durk spoke the truth. And he knew that he'd never break Durk by force—

Fighting the man's will would only build up the volcano pressure inside him

more intensely. Rawson determined on a psychological trick. He would allow Durk his chance at command.

"Very well, Mr. Durk. Let's see what you can do." He spoke with forced calm. "Take command."

Rawson's crane-like legs patted on the jerking deck of the space ship, and as he entered his cabin he was smiling grimly to himself.

He sat down in darkness, and his smile widened when the emergency lights flashed on. Durk was a good man for things like that.

Rawson was turning over some papers on his desk when a young cyclone burst through the open door without knocking. "Captain, sir!" young Seymour cried, bounding forward. "I overheard—"

Rawson snapped to his feet. "Mr. Seymour, attention! Please leave and enter like a gentleman."

The cabin boy folded up like a tornado that had lost its wind. Meekly he turned and walked out of the cabin, closed the door. A rap sounded.

"Come in."

As Seymour entered, Rawson hastily turned the sheet of paper on his desk face down. He greeted the young man with a smile.

"That's better. Always be a gentleman. If for no one's but your own self-respect."

"Yes, sir." Seymour had troubled eyes. "I came to report I overheard the crew talking. Said somethin' about taking over. I don't get it, sir. Does it mean mutiny?"

Rawson shot one word at the cabin boy. "Durk?"

"Yes, sir. It was him said it."

"You know you're a stool pigeon?"

The boy's freckled face looked flustered. "I—I didn't mean, sir—that is." He gulped. "I thought it was my duty, sir."

Rawson smiled and there was fatherly tenderness in his voice. "Good, Mr. Seymour. I like your loyalty. You'll make a Star Point man yet."

Rawson picked up the paper from his desk. "I have just signed a recommendation that you be admitted to the class of the year 2356."

Young Seymour's freckled face spread wide in a grin—so wide that it drowned out

his face. "Gee, sir. Thanks. Gee! *Star Point!*"

"I've been keeping an eye on you," Rawson continued. "I saw you studying in your spare time."

Rawson leaned back and reflected. "I was like that ten years ago. I worked hard! And this is my first command. I'm proud of it."

His voice cracked out suddenly like a whip. "And by God, no man, nothing, will make me dishonor my gold star or take it away from me!" His eyes stabbed at Seymour. "Now, what about Durk and the mutiny?"

"He says you're a sissy, sir. Afraid of the storm. He says you ain't got no business—"

"Very good, Mr. Seymour. That will be all."

**R**AWSON watched with a fond smile as Seymour departed.

Rawson had no intention of letting his precious cargo of serum be lost or his first space ship wrecked because of Durk's desire for the captaincy.

He picked up a volume "*Cross Currents of Space*" from his book shelf and opened it. After poring intently through many pages, he snapped to his crane-like feet with a grin.

They were approaching Orus—the planet which was covered with borax sand.

Rawson drew together his gangling frame, hung together with tremendous muscles and casually strode on his long legs into the control room.

The crew worked under the emergency lights dismantling the control panel. Durk's bullying voice urged them to speed like the slave whips of Jupiter. His face marked with his years in the space lanes like a freighter's meteor scars was covered with streaks of oil.

"Orus dead ahead," Rawson remarked with a grin. "It wouldn't do to set the *Star Flight* down for repairs."

Durk's mouth was bitter as an alligator's. "We're going down!"

Rawson strolled away whistling and grinning inwardly.

The rockets pounded as they were adjusted for the landing. It was a fairly simple job and Rawson knew Durk could handle it.

From the port in his cabin Rawson saw the *Star Flight* settle on a reef between a dark and forbidding pool and a swampy morass. Beyond was white, hilly sand.

Rawson turned sharply, on guard, as he heard heavy steps clump into his cabin. Durk and six of the crew.

"Well, Mr. Smarty, we got you now!" Durk's hoarse voice bellowed in triumph. "Yore under arrest!"

Rawson's muscles rippled and his blue eyes cracked with electric sparks. "Arrest?"

"Yeah! Not bein' in command in an emergency! Put him in irons, boys!"

Todd Rawson looked at the faces of the crew. By the tough lines about their eyes, by the grime in their skins, they showed that they were one with the underofficer—veterans of the spaceways who bowed only to experience and strength.

"This is mutiny. You know that, Mr. Durk!"

"No, it ain't!" the other said flatly. "You deserted yore duty. Me and the crew'll make it stick before the court-martial back home!"

Rawson saw that the underofficer had the force to back him up. "You won this round, Durk. But it's only the first." He smiled coolly.

A young cyclone thundered into the cabin. "Hey, what's going on here?"

"Mr. Seymour!" This from Rawson.

Young Seymour hesitated, but his freckled face was blazing. "Yes, sir." He replied mechanically. But his fists were balled and he advanced angrily on Durk. "You can't do it! Captain's got more brains than the whole bunch of you!"

"Shut 'up, Squirt!"

Young Seymour lunged at Durk and pounded his fists again the alligator toughness of the underofficer. Durk deftly cuffed the cabin boy and knocked him into a corner.

Seymour rose slowly, wiping the blood from the cut on his lips. He charged again with head lowered and balled fists.

Durk gave him a brief glance. "Throw him in irons."

Two hard space men grabbed Seymour by the arms and hauled him, kicking, out of the cabin. The boy's words came floating back. "You're goin' to be sorry, Durk—"



Rawson stared at his underofficer stonily. "Well?"

Durk scratched his chin reflectively. "Hmmm, guess we won't need to put you in irons. You won't try to run away in all that white sand."

Between several of the crew Rawson climbed out of the space-port. He jerked his crane-like body almost double as he bent into a heavy, hot searing wind like a breath from hell.

Toward one side the white, slimy ooze pond stretched like an oily sheet of death between the steep white cliffs that pitted it. It was about five times the width of the space ship and lay utterly lifeless, yet Rawson had a feeling of danger lurking beneath its surface.

**R**AWSON was the third man in the single file that fought its way on the slippery, glassy surface of the narrow neck of rock that lay at the tip of a finger of morass pointing at the slimy pool.

"We're gonna keep yah in one of them caves over there." Durk pointed beyond the line of cliffs that hemmed in the morass. In back of these, as far as Rawson's eyes could see, stretched white, bleak sand dunes.

A strong odor of swamp came to Rawson's nose. Swamp gas. Mixed with it was the alkaline taste of the sand that the hot wind drove into their mouth, eyes and nose.

Rawson carefully balanced himself on the isthmus of rock and stared with misgiving into the pool.

The crew man ahead of Rawson slipped.

He clutched wildly at Rawson, missed him, and rolled down the glassy slope into the pool.

The ooze parted heavily, with effort, and then surrounded him like a huge, sucking mouth.

The man screamed. "Quicksand Help! It's sucking me down—eeeeeh—."

With horror Rawson saw the white, slimy mess suck him down—down—

Rawson's voice screamed against the shriek of the wind. "Throw him a line!"

The man's struggling head sank below the surface. A frantic hand fought against the ooze, sank steadily deeper. The hand disappeared. Bubbles from the man's dy-

ing breath broke the surface. The slime drifted together again and was smooth and liquid again with the peace of death.

Rawson shuddered.

He stared at Durk who was looking dumbfounded into the pool. One of the crew had been lost under Durk's command. Would there be others?

When the chill winds of night came, Rawson was sitting inside a cave that looked down on the sink hole.

Rawson was carefully, meticulously, studying the crew and the lay of the land, like a general studies the ground before a battle.

He looked down into the depression which was like a huge inside-out face. The ridge on which the space ship rested looked like a monstrous nose between the two giant eyes—the farther eye the quicksand pool and the nearer a shallow swamp over which hung the swamp gas.

The crew was camped by a small fire near the swamp. Near them lay young Seymour, with his hands and feet bound.

Even in the cave the wind moaned incessantly and drove the bitter sand into Rawson's mouth. It blasted across the glassy ridge and whipped the fires beside the space ship.

If I can rescue Seymour, Rawson thought, we'll control the ship, if we manage to hold the control room. But he realized the difficulty.

Between the cave and the whipping fires of the crew, Rawson could see the mist that hung low over the swamp, just out of the reach of the wind. Sometimes a little of the mist was carried away and brought to his nose—swamp gas.

On silent feet, Rawson crept toward the swamp. The guard did not look up.

Rawson lay beside the soft, decayed soil and vegetation. Under cover of his body he snapped his automatic lighter. He hurled the blazing light into the swamp.

He leaped back.

Immediately a flame flashed across the swamp and leaped toward the sky and the roar of the explosion brought the entire crew to their feet with their flame ray weapons in their hands.

They stampeded toward the safety of the space ship.

Under cover of the explosion, Rawson rushed toward Seymour, picked him up

and fled with him into the darkness of the sandy desert, beyond the hills.

"Gee, sir!" the boy said after he recovered from his astonishment, and they lay in hiding on top of a tall hill and looked down on the excited bustle of the camp. "Did you do that?"

Rawson smiled grimly. "Nothing to it. Swamps create marsh gas, or methane gas, which is highly inflammable. A little fire will make a stagnant pocket of the gas go up with a bang."

Young Seymour looked at the lights of the camp with troubled eyes. "I'm sorry you rescued me, sir."

"What's this, Mr. Seymour?"

The young fellow avoided his captain's eyes. "I been thinking, sir, that—well, maybe, Underofficer Durk is right."

"So Durk's been talking to you, convincing you that I haven't enough experience to command a space ship!"

"I feel miserable about the whole thing, sir. It's—oh, gee, captain. Durk's got the ship and the men and he's had twenty-five years in the spaceways. He ought to know what's doing."

Rawson's voice was suddenly raw as Jovian liquor. "All right, Mr. Seymour. I understand. Get going!"

**T**HE BOY slunk away like a whipped dog. Once he hesitated and looked back, and then with lowered shoulders, he ploughed his way through the sand toward the space ship.

Rawson watched him go. He felt as though he had been deserted by his last friend.

This leaves me all alone, Rawson thought. Me against the crew. I've got to get command of the ship. The serum's got to go through. Saturn's depending on me.

I still say Mom's right. You've got to know how to do things and have the guts to carry them through. I'm not quitting.

And Jennifer Kane would be disappointed in me if I quit on my Star Point oath. She was so proud when I graduated. And when I received my promotions. Moved from underofficer to commander in three years. No wonder Durk is so bitter.

But it takes scientific knowledge these

days—that's it. Science will win a way out for me—

Rawson's mind began to work like an intricate machine. Thousands of stimuli of knowledge had been injected into his brain during his training; now his mind began to select and analyze these stimuli for the purpose of finding a solution to his predicament.

Rawson's self-respect was the rock of his courage.

I'll have to do this alone, he thought. As he saw that the crew members about the space ship had quieted down and that the camp was still for the night, he rose and fought his way against the wind toward the space ship, across the slippery neck of rock.

The space ship was dark and silent. A crew man nodded sleepily beside the fire to the left. Yet he had to be careful. Other members of the crew might leap out at him at any moment.

He slipped inside the space ship. He found the space suit. He donned it quickly, fastened the space helmet around his head. The space suit would help him in any emergency.

He was moving from the lockers to the control room past the port when a guard saw him. The man grabbed for him. "Gotcha!"

But the muscles strung on his bony frame exploded in power and the crew man fell aside. Rawson leaped through the lock and landed on the white ridge beside the quicksand pool.

The guard's yells brought the rest of the crew, and they advanced on him from all sides.

He backed slowly from the menacing circle, looking for an opening through which to dart. But they came from both sides of the ship. In his rear was the slimy quicksand. He backed toward it.

One of the crew's stumbling feet loosened a boulder and it came hurtling toward Rawson. He leaped aside but his crane-like feet landed on gravel and he started to slide off balance backwards.

The crew realized before Rawson did what was happening. "He's sliding into the quicksand! Stop him!"

Rawson felt the pressure of the wet sand on the space suit. He struggled for a hold on the rocks. They came away in

his hands. He slid deeper.

He felt the suction at his feet, climbing up to his waist, over his shoulders.

The white quicksand went over the space suit visor and cut out the light of the moon. Still he kept sinking, slowly, steadily, in the depths.

WITH AN EFFORT he forced his hand to his belt and adjusted the levers to permit oxygen for his breathing to swell the space suit.

He could breath, but he could not control his movements. The pressure of the wet sand weighted heavily on him and smothered him in a blanket of darkness.

He moved down slowly as on greased feathers into a bottomless pit. His legs dangled limply, drifting now this way, now that. He put his arms out to steady himself, but the muck gave way before him.

He heard only the slight bubbling sound of the oxygen escaping through the vent in his space suit.

He felt a sucking pull on his body and on his limbs as he went down—down—

At last he hung suspended. His weight balanced the density of the pressure of the sand.

His mind worked furiously—in a race with death.

He remembered the slight alkaline taste that had penetrated to his mouth and nose back on the surface. Alkaline?

He had read about that—in the "*Cross Currents of Space*"—Orus was the borax planet.

And suddenly his training in the chemistry of borax rushed through his frantic mind.

He smiled grimly to himself as he reached for the heat ray gun at his waist. No, it hadn't been lost. He detached it and forced it through the quicksand in front of him.

Carefully he aimed the heat ray gun upward, pressed the trigger.

Light so bright and intense and so hot that Rawson felt the heat and light in the clutching quicksand bored a hole through the muck.

It was a thin rod of penetration, about two inches wide and extended straight upwards to where Rawson thought the edge of the pit would be.

Long and patiently he trained the heat ray gun.

And as he waited a chemical change took place before his eyes. In the light of the heat ray gun, he saw a thin rod of white porous mass forming. It extended through the quicksand upward along the line of the heat ray.

And as he watched, the white mass melted into a clear liquid. He kept the heat ray gun concentrated until its power died and the weapon became a useless piece of metal.

Rawson had won. He had created liquid glass.

Patiently he waited for the liquid to harden. Would it make it possible for him to escape this quicksand death?

For hours he hung suspended in the ooze. When he judged that there had been time enough for the liquid to harden into glass, he extended his hand toward it.

His groping fingers found a strong, smooth rod fused to the rock above.

Hand over hand he made his way up, forcing himself through the heavy ooze. When he reached the top, he crawled out, half dead and staggered to firm ground.

He stumbled. But he saw at a glance that he had drifted far from the place where he had fallen in. The space ship was several hundred yards away, completely hidden by a hill.

A few feet more, he staggered and stumbled into a dank pool. He took off the space helmet and drank deeply and crammed some concentrated food pills into his mouth.

His muscles were sore and weary. He knew he had to rest. He found the coolness of a cave. Hardly had he dropped to the sandy floor when he fell into an exhausted sleep.

FOR HOURS he lay and his body regenerated its youthful vitality.

He stirred restlessly in his sleep when he felt the pressure of another hand on his. He sat up abruptly, on guard.

A freckled boy's face was looking down on him with wonder in the blue eyes. "Captain Rawson, sir," Seymour said. "I was explorin' and found you here. Gee, sir, how did you escape out of the quicksand?"

Rawson regarded the young man with wonder. "Sit down, Mr. Seymour."

Rawson explained about the borax and his escape. "But what about you and Durk?"

The boy made circles in the sand with his foot. His eyes avoided the captain's. "I couldn't stand it, sir. My conscience. It wasn't right. You're the captain, no matter what Durk says."

"Thanks. Okay, let's get going."

Purposely they strode across the sand toward the space ship. But as they neared the top of the hill beyond which lay the space ship, they heard a series of loud explosions. Rawson recognized those sounds.

With a rush he was on top of the hill and staring at the space ship.

The explosions came from there. The ports were closed and there was no one on the bridge.

The ship was taking off!

Rawson's skeleton-like body shuddered in dismay. He yelled but he knew it was futile. No one could hear him above the roar of the rockets.

And if they did? Durk might find it convenient to report that the captain had been lost on the expedition.

For once in his life, Rawson admitted fear to himself—to be deserted on this waste planet!

The space ship quivered under the impact of the rockets. And Rawson noticed a queer thing about that vibration—it was normal in itself, but it was never intended to occur on a glassy cliff that sloped into a quicksand.

The vibration loosed the pull of gravity of the ship—its steadiness on the ridge—it slipped sideways.

It slipped sideways into the quicksand.

The space ship moved sideways over the edge of the cliff and started to sink beneath the lake of quicksand.

As the bottom half of the hull disappeared below the surface of the ooze, the top ports opened and the crew began leaping from the hull onto the cliff.

Rawson counted them. They were all there. All sixty—there should be sixty-one. But one had been lost in the quicksand at the first landing.

The crew stood huddled in a bunch and watched the top of the hull disappear below the quicksand.

Rawson's crane-like legs carried him toward the crew. Their faces showed repentance.

It was a miserable bunch of men that faced him, and the most miserable of all was Underofficer Durk.

Rawson for a moment said nothing. He watched the last air bubbles that seeped up from the space ship at the bottom of the quicksand. The bubbles broke one by one. The sand smoothed out again, leaving a slimy smoothness that revealed nothing—that failed to betray the loss of all hope.

Rawson's voice whipped like a lash. "Well, Mr. Durk! Have you thought of a solution of the predicament of the crew and yourself?"

Durk's eyes did not meet Rawson's. Durk's voice mumbled. "Yore the captain, sir."

Rawson shuddered within himself. He was the captain—captain of a space ship that no longer existed. They were stranded on a desolate planet with no food and no weapons.

Weapons? He still had his heat ray gun, but it was burned out—no good.

Wearily Rawson turned to young Seymour. "Bring me my space suit."

It took but a few minutes for the boy to run back to the cave and fetch back the space suit. Slowly Rawson climbed into it.

He turned to Durk. "I'm going into the quicksand. Perhaps I'll be able to find something—something—" He sighed. "If I don't return, well, it's up to you."

He leaped far forward, felt his feet sink into the clutching quicksand.

The muck enfolded him like cold, slimy snake coils twisting around and crushing him.

As he sank below the surface, he heard the bursting air bubbles above him like sibilant whispers of death. The dread, crushing quicksand drew around like crushing giant hands.

This time Rawson had no heat ray gun to help him escape!

His lips twisted helplessly under the pressure of the sand and the water. It was like being buried alive in cement that had not yet hardened.

His feet struck something solid. The hull. Using his feet as leverage he forced himself forward against the grasping ooze, until he came to one of the ports. It was open and the quicksand had oozed in.

RAWSON managed to grasp the railing by sheer muscle and forced himself inside. The shifting, liquefied sand covered the entire top deck.

But the door to the lower hatches and the control decks had sealed automatically. He turned the lever and pushed the door off the hatch inwards.

The pressure of the sand hurled him inside like water shot from a nozzle.

He raced for the farther door—raced to beat the moving quicksand that oozed forward like some giant amoeba.

Rawson won by a second. He opened the door and dived inward. Quickly he closed the door and sealed it as he felt the pressure of the muck against it. The metal locks would hold.

He stripped off the space suit and hurried to the rocket deck. Everything was in order. A member of the crew had automatically cut off the disintegrator motors at the call "Abandon Ship!"

Rawson set the speed at idle. He turned the rocket levers. For a moment the ship trembled as the exhaust gases fought against the pressure of the quicksand in the tubes.

The rockets thundered in full power. Rawson waited. The heat of those exhaust gases was tremendous—made ten times so by their compression in the ooze.

Heat! That was it!

But would the rockets be powerful enough to change the composition of the quicksand?

He felt the heat of the compressed gases through the floor of the hull, and their motion through the muck was accompanied by a loud glub—glub—glub— Sounds like the choking of a primeval monster.

This sound gradually died out, and the heat became intense. Rawson removed his shirt and whipped the perspiration from his eyes. The sweat dripped down his arms and made little wet spots on the floor. He began shifting from foot to foot as the heat became uncomfortable on the soles of his feet.

There was no way to seeing what was going on outside the space ship. All the ports were blocked by the muck.

Presently he touched the dials. The indicator moved from "idle" to "take-off." He gunned the rockets.

The ship lurched forward, groaned, and wallowed deeper into the ooze. It was no go.

Rawson returned the power to idle and waited patiently. Perhaps it could still be done.

Perhaps—but more likely not!

Rawson was not ready to despair. He waited with the courage of his conviction that a way could be found through science.

He waited for three hours, and then he touched the controls again. He set the dials to depress the nose, pulled the lever for the reverse. Then he punched the needle for full power. He geared in the traction.

The space ship leaped backward with a jerk, found firm footing, and crawled with accelerated power. It surged swifter and swifter like an unleashed Neptune cyclone.

And as he felt the motion of the vessel beneath his feet, Rawson looked up and saw the light stream through the muck that covered the port windows.

He had broken free!

By instinct he guided the vessel all alone to a new landing. He had to be navigator, engineer, pilot, and do the many tedious things that require many hands and brains to control a ship.

SEVERAL days later they were near Saturn and Rawson had just received congratulations on bringing in the serum in time to save thousands of lives. He sat at his desk, his skeleton frame hunched like an ostrich, when a young cyclone burst into his cabin.

"Captain, sir," young Seymour cried, bounding forward. "I overheard—"

Rawson snapped to his feet. "Mr. Seymour, Attention! Please leave and enter like a gentleman."

Meekly the cabin boy walked out, closed the door. A rap sounded.

"Come in." And as the lad entered Rawson said with a smile, "That's better."

"Yes, sir. I came to report I overheard the crew talking."

"Durk?"

"Yes, sir. Underofficer Durk says you're voted the best darn space commander that ever flew the stars. And that he'll lick the denims off anybody that says different."

# The Last Monster

By GARDNER F. FOX

**Irgi was the last of his monster race, guardian of a dead planet, master of the secret of immortality. It was he whom the four men from Earth had to conquer to gain that secret — a tentacled monstrosity whom Earthly weapons could not touch.**

**I**RGI WAS the last of his race. There was no one else, now; there had been no others for hundreds and hundreds of years. Irgi had lost count of time dwelling alone amid the marble halls of the eon-ancient city, but he knew that much. There were no others.

Only Irgi, alone.

He moved now along the ebony flooring, past the white marble walls hung with golden drapes that never withered or shed their aurate luster in the opalescent mists that bathed the city in shimmering whiteness. They hung low, those wispy tendrils of mist, clasping everything in their clinging shelter, destroying dust and germs. Irgi had discovered the mist many years ago, when it was too late to save his kind.

He had flung a vast globe of transparent metal above this greatest of the cities of the Urg and filled it with the mist, and in it he had stored the treasures of his people. From Bar Nomala, from Faryl, and from the far-off jungle city of Kreed had he brought the riches of the Urg and set them up. Irgi enjoyed beauty, and he enjoyed work. It was the combination of both that kept him sane.

Toward a mighty bronze doorway he went, and as his body passed an invisible beam, the bronze portals slid apart, noiselessly, opening to reveal a vast circular chamber that hummed and throbbed, and was filled with a pale blue luminescence that glimmered upon metal rods and bars and ten tall cones of steelite.

In the doorway, Irgi paused and ran his eyes about the chamber, sighing.

This was his life work, this blue hum and throb. Those ten cones lifting their disced tips toward a circular roof bathed in, and drew their power from, a huge block of radiant white matter that hung suspended between the cones, in midair. All power did the cones and the block

possess. There was nothing they could not do, if Irgi so willed. It was another discovery that came too late to save the Urg.

Irgi moved across the room. He pressed glittering jewels inset in a control panel on the wall, one after another, in proper sequence.

The blue opalescence deepened, grew dark and vivid. The hum broadened into a hoarse roar. And standing out, startlingly white against the blue, was the queer block of shining metal, shimmering and pulsing.

Irgi drew himself upwards, slowly turning, laving in the quivering bands of cobalt that sped outward from the cones. He preened his body in their patterns of color, watching it splash and spread over his chest and torso. Where it touched, a faint tingle lingered; then spread upwards, all over his huge form.

Irgi was immortal, and the blue light made him so.

"There, it is done," he whispered to himself. "Now for another oval I can roam all Urg as I will, for the life spark in me has been cleansed and nourished."

He touched the jeweled controls, shutting the power to a low murmur. He turned to the bronze doors, passed through and into the misty halls.

"I must speak," Irgi said as he moved along the corridor. "I have not spoken for many weeks. I must exercise my voice, or lose it. That is the law of nature. It would atrophy, otherwise.

"Yes, I will use my voice tonight, and I will go out under the dome and look up at the stars and the other planets that swing near Urg, and I will talk to them and tell them how lonely Irgi is."

He turned and went along a hall that opened into a broad balcony which stood forth directly beneath a segment of the





Illustrated by INGELS

mighty dome. He stared upwards, craning all his eyes to see through the darkness pressing down upon him.

"Stars," he whispered, "listen to me once again. I am lonely, stars, and the name and fame of Irgi means nothing to the walls of my city, nor to the Chamber of the Cones, nor even—at times—to Irgi himself."

He paused and his eyes widened, staring upwards.

"By the Block," he said to the silence about him. "There is something up there that is not a star, nor a planet, nor yet a meteor."

It was a spaceship.

EMERSON took his hands from the controls of the gigantic ship that hurtled through space, and wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs. His grey eyes bored like a steel awl downward at the mighty globe swinging in the void.

"The last planet in our course," he breathed. "Maybe it has the radium!"

"Yes," whispered the man beside him, wetting his lips with his tongue. "No use to think of failure. If it hasn't, we'll die ourselves, down there."

Radium. And the Plague. It had come on Earth suddenly, had the Plague, back in the first days of space travel, after Quigg, the American research scientist at Cal Tech, discovered a way to lift a rocket ship off the Earth, and propel it to the Moon.

They had been slow, lumbering vessels, those first spaceships; not at all like the sleek craft that plied the voids today. But it had been a beginning. And no one had thought anything of it when Quigg, who had made the first flight through space, died of cancer.

As the years passed to a decade, and the ships of Earth rode to Mars and Venus, it began to be apparent that a lifetime of space travel meant a hideous death. Scientists attributed it to the cosmic rays, for out in space there was no blanketing layer of atmosphere to protect the fleshy tissues of man from their piercing power. It had long been a theory that cosmic rays were related to the birth of new life in the cosmos; perhaps they were, said some, the direct cause of life. Thus by causing the unorderly growth of new cells that man

called cancer, the cosmic rays were destroying the life they had created.

It meant death to travel in space, and only the stupendous fees paid to the young men who believed in a short life and a merry one, kept the ships plying between Mars and Earth and Venus. Lead kept out the cosmic rays, but lead would not stand the terrific speed required to lift a craft free of planetary gravity; and an inner coating of lead brought men into port raving with lead poisoning illusions.

Cancer cases increased on Earth. It was learned that the virulent form of space cancer, as it was called, was in some peculiar manner, contagious to a certain extent. The alarm spread. Men who voyaged in space were segregated, but the damage had been done.

The Plague spread, and ravaged the peoples of three planets.

Hospitals were set up, and precious radium used for the fight. But the radium was hard to come by. There was just not enough for the job.

A ship was built, the fastest vessel ever made by man. It was designed for speed. It made the swiftest interplanetary craft seem a lumbering barge by comparison. And mankind gave it to Valentine Emerson to take it out among the stars to find the precious radium in sufficient quantities to halt the Plague.

It had not been easy to find a crew. The three worlds knew the men were going to their doom. It would be a miracle if ever they reached a single planet, if they did not perish of space cancer before their first goal. Carson Nichols, whose wife and children were dying of the Plague, begged him for a chance. A murderer convicted to the Martian salt mines, Karl Mussdorf, grudgingly agreed to go along on the promise that he won a pardon if he ever came back. With Mussdorf went a little, wry-faced man named Tilford Gunn, who knew radio, cookery, and the fine art of pocket-picking. The two seemed inseparable.

Now Emerson was breathing softly, "Yes, it had better be there, or else we die."

He ran quivering fingers over his forearm, felt the strange lumps that heralded cancer. Involuntarily, he shuddered.

Steps clanged on the metal runway be-

neath them. Mussdorf pushed up through the trap and got to his feet. He was as big as Emerson, bulky where Emerson was lithe, granite where Emerson was chiseled steel. His hair was black, and his brows shaggy. A stubborn jaw shot out under thin, hard lips.

"There it is, Karl," said Nichols. "Start hoping."

Mussdorf scowled darkly, and spat.

"A hell of a way to spend my last days," he growled. "I'm dying on my feet, and I've got to be a martyr to a billion people who don't know I'm alive."

"You know a better way to die, of course," replied Emerson.

"You bet I do. There's a sweet little redhead in New Mars. She'd make dying a pleasure. In fact," he chuckled softly, "that's just the way I'd let her kill me."

EMERSON snorted, glancing down at the controls. Beneath his steady fingers, the ship sideslipped into the gravity tug of the looming orb, shuddered a moment, then eased downward.

"Tell Gunn to come up," ordered Emerson. "No need for him to be below."

Mussdorf dropped to the floor lowered his shaggy head through the open trap, and bellowed. A hail from the depths of the ship answered him. A moment later, Gunn stood with the others: a little man with a wry smile twisting his features to a hard mask.

"Think she's got the stuff, skipper?" he asked Emerson.

"The spectroscope'll tell us. Break it out."

"You bet."

The ship rocked gently as Emerson set it down on a flat, rocky plain between two high, craggy mountains that rose abruptly from the tiny valley. It was just lighting as the faint rays of the suns that served this planet nosed their way above the peaks. Like a silver needle on a floor of black rock, the spacecraft bounced once, twice; then lay still.

Within her gleaming walls, four men bent with hard faces over gleaming bands of color on a spectroscopic screen. With quivering fingers, Emerson twisted dials and switches.

"Hell!" exploded Mussdorf. "I might have known it. Not a trace."

Emerson touched his forearm gently, and shuddered.

Nichols bit his lips, and thought of Marge and the kids; Gunn licked his lips with a dry tongue and kept looking at Emerson.

With one sweep of his brawny arm, Mussdorf sent the apparatus flying against the far wall to shatter in shards.

No one said a word.

Something whispered in the ship. They jerked their heads up, stood listening. The faint susurration swept all about them, questioning, curious. It came again, imperative; suddenly demanding.

"Gawd," whispered Gunn. "Wot is it, guv'nor?"

Emerson shook his head, frowning, suddenly glad that the others had heard it, too.

"Maybe somebody trying to speak to us," stated Nichols.

The whispers grew louder and harsher. Angry.

"Take it easy," yelled Mussdorf savagely. "We don't know what you're talking about. How can we answer you, you stupid lug?"

Gunn giggled hysterically, "We can't even 'alf talk 'is bloomin' language."

The rustle ceased. The silence hung eerily in the ship. The men looked at one another, curious; somehow, a little nervous.

"What a radio *he* must have," said Emerson softly. "The metal of our hull is his loudspeaker. That's why we heard him in all directions."

Mussdorf nodded, shaggy brows knotted.

"We'll see what his next move is," he muttered. "If he gets too fresh, we'll try a sun-blastor out on him."

The ship began to glow softly, flushing a soft, delicate green. The light bathed the interior, turning the men a ghastly hue. Gunn shivered and looked at Emerson, who went to the port window; stood staring out, gasping.

"Wot's happenin' now?" choked Gunn.

"We're off the ground! Whatever it is, it's lifting us."

The others crowded about him, looking out. Here the green was more vivid, intense. They could feel its surging power tingling on their skins. Beneath them, the jagged peak of the mountain almost grazed the hull. Spread out under their eyes was the panorama of a dead planet.

Great rocks lay split and tumbled over

one another in a black desolation. Sunlight glinting on their jagged edges, made harsh shadows. Far to the north a mountain range shrugged its snow-topped peaks to a sullen sky. To the south, beyond the rocks, lay a white waste of desert. To the west—

"A city," yelled Nichols. "the place is inhabited. Thank God, thank God—"

Mussdorf erupted laughter.

"For what? How do we know what they're like? An inhabited planet doesn't mean men. We found that out—several times."

"We can hope," said Emerson sharply. "Maybe they have some radium, stored so that our spectroscope couldn't pick it up."

The mighty globe that hung over the city glimmered in the morning suns. Beneath it, the white towers and spires of the city reared in alien loveliness above graceful buildings and rounded roofs. A faint mist seemed to hang in the city streets.

"It's empty," said Nichols heavily. "Deserted."

"Something's alive," protested Emerson. "Something that spoke to us, that is controlling this green beam."

A SECTION of the globe slid back, and the spaceship moved through the opening. The globe slipped back and locked after it.

"They have us now," grunted Mussdorf. He slid his fingers along the transparent window, pressing hard, the skin showing white as his knuckles lifted. He said swiftly, "You guys can stay here if you want, but I'm getting myself a sun-blast. Two of them. I'm not going to be caught short when the time for action comes."

He swung through the trap and out of sight. They heard him running below; heard the slam of opened doors, the withdrawal of the guns. They could imagine him belting them about his waist.

"Bring us some," cried Emerson suddenly, and turned again to look out the window.

The spaceship settled down on the white flagging of an immense square. The green beam was gone, suddenly. The uncanny silence of the place pressed in on them.

"Think it's safe to go out?" asked Nichols.

"Try the atmospheric recorder," said

Emerson. "If the air's okay, I'd like to stretch my own legs."

Nichols twisted chrome wheels, staring at a red line that wavered on a plastic screen, then straightened abruptly, rigid.

"Hey," yelled Nichols excitedly. "It's pure. I mean actually pure. No germs. No dust. Just clean air!"

Emerson leaped to his side, staring, frowning.

"No germs. No dust. Why—that means there's no disease in this place! No disease."

He began to laugh, then caught himself.

"No disease," he whispered, "and every one of us is going to die of cancer."

Mussdorf came up through the trap and passed out the sun-blasters. They buckled them around their waists while Mussdorf swung the bolts of the door. He threw it open, and clean air, and faint tendrils of whitish mist came swirling into the ship.

Nichols took a deep breath and his boyish face split with a grin.

"I feel like a kid again on a Spring day back on Earth. You know, with a ball and a glove under your arm, with the sun beating down on you, swinging a bat and whistling. You felt good. You were young. Young! I feel like that now."

They grinned and went through the door, dropping to the street.

They turned.

It was coming across the square, flowing along on vast black tentacles towering over twenty feet high, with a great torso seemingly sculpted out of living black marble. A head that held ten staring eyes looked down at them. Six arms thrust out of the torso, moving like tentacles, fringed with cilia thick as fingers.

"Lord," whispered Mussdorf. "What is it?"

"Don't know," said Emerson. "Maybe it's friendly—"

"Friendly?" queried Mussdorf harshly. "That doesn't know the meaning of the word! I'm going to let it taste a blast—"

His hand dove for the sun-blaster in his holster; yanked it free and upward, firing brilliant yellow jets as he jerked the trigger.

"Look out!" yelled Emerson.

The thing twisted sideways with an eerie grace, dodging the amber beams of solar power that sizzled past its bulbous

head. As it moved, its tentacled arms and legs slithered out with unthinkable rapidity, fell and wrapped around Mussdorf.

The big Earthman was lifted high into the air, squeezed until his lungs nearly collapsed. He hung limp in a gigantic tentacle as Emerson ran to one side, trying for a shot without hitting Mussdorf. But the thing was diabolically clever. It held Mussdorf aloft, between itself and Emerson, while its other arms stabbed out at Gunn and Nichols, catching them up and shaking them as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Hold on," called Emerson, dodging and twisting, gun in hand, seeking a spot to fire at.

The thing dropped the Earthmen suddenly; its legs gathered beneath it and launched it full at Emerson. Caught off guard, the Earthman lifted his sun-blaster—felt it ripped from his fingers, knew a hard blackness thrashing down at him. He went backwards, sickened. . . .

**I**RGI STARED at the things that lay on the white flagging. Queer beings they were, unlike anything Irgi had ever conceived. Only two legs, only two arms. And such weak little limbs! Why, an Urganian cat would make short work of them if an Urganian cat existed any more, and Irgi had never rated cats very highly.

He looked at the spaceship, ran exploring feelers over it. He cast a glance back at the creatures again, and shook his head. Strange beings they might be, but they had mastered interplanetary travel. Well, he'd always maintained that life would be different on other worlds. Life here on Urg took different patterns.

Irgi bent to wrap long arms about the queer beings, lifting them. His eyes were caught suddenly by the lumps protruding from their arms and legs, from face and chest. The growth disease! That was bad, but Irgi knew a way to cure it. Irgi knew a way to cure anything.

He slid swiftly across the square and onto a flat, glittering ramp that stretched upward toward an arched doorway set like a jewel of light in a long, low building next to the vast, round Chamber of the Cones. He carried these creatures easily, without trouble. The ease of his passage gave him time to think.

He had been glad to find these

creatures. They were someone to converse with after centuries of loneliness. But as he approached them there in the square, calling out gladly to them, they could not hear him. His voice was pitched eight vibrations to the second. He wondered idly if that was beyond the hearing range of these two-legged things. He ought to check that, to be sure. Still, they had heard him on their ship. He had caught a confused, angry murmur on the radiation recorder. Perhaps the metal of the hull had in some manner made his voice audible to them, speeded up the vibrations to twelve or fifteen a second.

Then there was the matter of the growth disease. He could eliminate that easily enough, in the Chamber of the Cones. But first they would have to be prepared. And the preparation—hurt. Well, better a few moments of agony than a death through a worse.

And if he could not speak to them, they could speak to him, through their minds. Once unconscious, he could tap their memories with an electrigraph screen. That should be absorbing. It made Irgi happy, reflecting upon it, and Irgi had not known happiness for a long time.

From the passage he hurried into a large white room, fitted with glass vials and ovules and glittering metal instruments, so many in number that the room seemed a jungle of metal. Down on flat, smooth tables Irgi dropped his burdens. With quick tendrils he adjusted straps to them, bound them securely. From a small, wheeled vehicle he took a metal rod and touched it to their foreheads. As it met the flesh, it hummed once faintly.

"It's short-circuited their nervous systems for a while, absorbed the electric charges all intelligent beings cast," Irgi said aloud, glad at this chance to exercise his voice. "They won't be able to feel for some time. When the worst pain will have passed, they will recover. And now to examine their minds—"

He fitted metal clamps over their heads and screwed them tight. He wheeled forward a glassy screen; plugged in the cords that dangled from its frame to the metal clamps.

"I wonder if they've perfected this," Irgi mused. "They must be aware that the brain gives off electrical waves. Per-

haps they can chart those waves on graphs. But do they know that each curve and bend of those waves represents a picture? I can translate those waves into pictures—but can they?”

He slouched a little on his tentacles, squatting, gazing at the screen as he flipped over a lever.

A picture quivered on the screen; grew nebulous, then cleared. Irgi found himself staring at a city far vaster than Urg. Grim white towers peaked high into the air, and broad, flat ramps circled them, interwoven like ribbons in the sunlight. On the tallest and largest buildings were great fields of metal painted a dull luster, where queerly wrought flying ships landed and took off.

The scene changed suddenly. He looked into a hospital room and watched a pretty young woman smiling up at him. She too, had the growth disease. Now he beheld the mighty salt mines where naked men swung huge picks at the crusted crystals, sweating and dying under a strange sun. Even these remnants of humanity festered with the growth.

A tall, lean man in white looked out at him. His lips moved, and Irgi read their meaning. This man spoke to one named Emerson, commissioning him with a spaceship, reciting the need of radium, the dread of the plague. The thoughts of this Emerson were coming in clearer, as Irgi in sudden interest, flipped over different dials. The unspoken thoughts pouring into his brain through the screen continued. The words he did not understand, but the necessity for radium, and the danger of the growth disease he did. The pictures jumbled, grew chameleonesque—

Irgi stared upward at a colossal figure graven in lucent white marble. He made out the letters chiseled into the base: GEORGE WASHINGTON. He wondered idly what this Washington had done, to merit such undying fame. He must have created a nation, or saved it. He wished there were Urgians alive to build a statue to him.

He rose suddenly, standing upright on his tentacles, swaying gently. Why, he had the power to make himself immortal! These creatures would gladly build statues to him! True, he could not create a nation—but he could save it!

Irgi unfastened clamps, and rolled the screen aside. He reached to a series of black knobs inset in the wall, and turned them carefully. Turning, he saw the figures of the four men stiffen to rigidity as a red aura drifted upward from the tabletop, passing through them as if they were mist, rising upwards to dissipate in the air near the ceiling.

“That will prepare their bodies for the Chamber of the Cones,” he said. “When they realize that I am their friend, they will gladly hear my counsels!”

Opening the laboratory door, Irgi passed out and closed it behind him.

IT WAS the sweat of agony trickling down his forehead and over his eyes and cheeks that woke Emerson. He opened his eyes, then clamped them shut as his body writhed in pain.

“Oh, Lord!” he whimpered, bloodying his mouth where his teeth sank into his lips.

In every fibre of his body sharp lancets cut and dug. In arms and legs and chest and belly they twisted and tore. Into the tissues beneath his skin, all along the muscles and the bone, the fiery torment played. He could not stand it; he could not—

He flipped his head to right, to left; saw the others stretched out and strapped even as he. They were unconscious. What right had they to ignore this agony? Why didn't they share it with him? He opened his lips to shriek; then bit down again, hard.

Nichols screamed suddenly, his body aching.

It woke the others. They too, bellowed and screamed and sobbed, and their arms and legs writhed like wild things in a trap.

“Got to get free,” Emerson panted, straining against the wristbands. The hard muscles of his arms ridged with effort, but the straps held. He dropped back, sobbing.

“That fiend,” yelled Mussdorf. “That ten-eyed, octopus-legged, black-hearted spawn of a mismated monster did this to us. Damn him! Damn him! If I ever get loose I'll cut his heart out and make him eat it.”

“Maybe—maybe he's vivisectioning us,” moaned Nichols. “With rays or—or some-



thing—aagh! I can't stand it!"

"Hang on, kid," gritted Emerson, fighting the straps. "I think it's lessening. Yeah, yeah—it is. It doesn't hurt so much now."

Mussdorf grunted astonishment.

"You're right. It is lessening. And—hey, one of my arm buckles is coming loose. It's torn a little. Maybe I can work it free."

They turned their heads to watch, biting their lips, the sweat standing in colorless beads on their pale foreheads. Mussdorf's thick arm bulged its muscles as he wrenched and tugged, panting. A buckle swung outward, clanging against the tabletop as it ripped loose. Mussdorf held his arm aloft and laughed harsh triumph.

"I'll have you all loose in a second," he grunted, ripping straps from his body.

He leaped from the table and stretched. He grinned into their faces.

"You know, it's funny—but I feel great. Huh, I must've sweated all the aches out of me. Here, Gunn—you first."

"Thanks, Karl. We're still pals, aren't we?"

When Gunn was free, Mussdorf came to stand over Emerson, looking down at him. His eyes narrowed suddenly. He grinned a little, twisting his lips.

"Maybe you fellows ought to stay tied up," he said. "In case that—that thing comes back. He won't blame us all for the break we're making."

"Not on your life," said Emerson.

But Mussdorf shook his head, and his lips tightened.

"No. No, I think it's better the way I say."

"Don't be a fool, Mussdorf," snapped Emerson savagely. "It isn't your place to think, anyhow. That's mine. I'm commander of this force. What I say is an order."

Mussdorf grinned dryly. Into his eyes came a glint of hot, sullen anger.

"You were our commander—out there, in space. We're on a planet now. Things are different. I want to learn the secret of those mists, Emerson. Something tells me I'd get a fortune for it, on Earth."

Emerson squirmed helplessly, cursing him, saying, "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing new. Remember me, Karl Mussdorf? I'm a convict, I am. A salt

mine convict. I'd have done anything to get out of that boiling hell. I volunteered to go with you for the radium. Me and Gunn. Nichols doesn't count. He came on account of his wife and kids. We were the only two who'd come. Convicts, both of us."

MUSSDORF drew air into his lungs until his ribs showed against the rips in his jacket.

He went on slowly, "All along I've thought that if we ever did discover radium in any quantity to cure the folks of space out of it. I want to be that somebody, Emerson. With my pardon and that profit. I could be a boss on Mars. And you know what it's like to be a boss on Mars."

Emerson writhed in his straps, wrenching and twisting until his muscles crackled, seeking freedom. His lips snarled oaths at the big criminal.

"If I ever get out of this, I'll teach you who's boss—right here!"

Mussdorf laughed his confidence, "Don't worry. You won't. Those straps are pretty secure. I'm lucky one of mine was ripped."

The big man turned to Gunn; looked down at him, curiously.

"You with me, Til?"

Gunn looked at Emerson; looked up at Mussdorf, nodding.

"I think we got a chance, guv'nor," he muttered softly. "Them mists that don't 'ave germs. They're worth lots. People will pay plenty for h'air without germs."

The big man and the little man swung toward the door. They paused at the threshold and glanced back.

"We'll give you a chance to think it over, Emerson," Mussdorf grated. "You can use a few billions, same as us. We aren't hogs. We're willing to share—"

"Get out!" Emerson spat.

Mussdorf shrugged and followed Gunn into the corridor, carefully closing the door behind him. He glanced both ways frowning.

"We don't know this space," he said slowly. "Stick close to me, Til. We might meet some more of that beast's pals. He's too much for us physically, but damned if I don't believe we got more grey matter than him and his whole tribe, if we use it right!"

They went along the black marble flooring for long minutes. The thick drapes along the walls muffled their footsteps, but they cast anxious glances behind them. The eerie silence that overhung the place scratched at their uneasy nerves.

Mussdorf's hand vised on Gunn until the little man whimpered.

Behind them there was the slow shuffle of a mighty body.

"In here," snapped Mussdorf, drawing Gunn with him into a niche sculpted in the marble wall. They pressed back, drawing the drapes about them. Biting on their tongues, they held their breaths.

The huge black body trod past, stirring the drapes and uncovering the feet of the Earthmen. But he did not glance aside. Mussdorf and Gunn let their breath out slowly, silently. They did not know that Irgi was the last of his race, that he was used to loneliness, that he was not given to looking away from his objective.

They peered out: saw the monster nearing two great bronze doors sculpted with forms of alien beauty. Watching breathlessly, they saw the doors slide open untouched.

"Light beam," whispered Mussdorf.

They caught a glimpse of the Chamber of the Cones through the doorway; saw with awe the great block of glimmering white, pulsing with an inner fire. The ten glittering cones with their rings of shimmering light made them gape.

They eased forward, and halted at the doors.

The black thing was pressing levers, working them swiftly. The great cones began to hum softly, began to throb. They could feel that terrific power pulsating through the room, making them quiver in rhythm though they stood beyond its range. The faint azure haze darkened; grew deeper, a dark blue. In broad bands of light the blue leaped from the cones, poured outward over the room.

Irgi too, they saw. He lifted himself to his full height, turning and pirouetting gracefully despite his bulk. He bathed in the light, and it sprayed over and covered him.

"He's h'on h'a bat," croaked Gunn in hoarse excitement. "E's getting drunk on that stuff, whatever it is. A bender, a rip-snorting gear 'e's 'avin' for himself. Look

at him. Like it was champagne he was wallowin' in. Gawd—I could stand a snootful of that myself!"

He leaped swiftly, before Mussdorf could stop him.

Past the big man's outstretched arm he charged, full into the beating bands of blue.

"Oh good Lord!" whispered Mussdorf.

**B**EFORE his eyes little Gunn stiffened in intolerable agony, straight up, rigid. He hung that way for one long instant, immobile.

Then Gunn—disappeared.

Mussdorf blinked, and looked. The little pickpocket had been right before him an instant ago. Now where he had been was nothing but those pulsing ribbons on cobalt, pounding, beating, throbbing.

He's gone right in front of my eyes, Mussdorf thought. Evaporated. Into thin air. No, not into air. Into that blue color. It just absorbed him, like a blotter sops up ink!

Mussdorf knew cold fright, shuddering.

He whirled and ran, straight up the corridor toward the laboratory door. It shot back before the thrust of his arms. He leaped for the white tables as Emerson and Nichols stared at him, wondering at his pale face.

Big brown hands seized on the straps that held Emerson, fighting to burst them.

"Calm down, man," said Emerson evenly. "If those things could break, I'd have broken them, Undo the buckles."

"Yeah, yeah. You're right," sobbed the big convict.

"What happened to you?"

"Not to me. To Gunn. Little Tilford Gunn. Gone. That—that damned black beast killed him with his blue color. Right in front of my eyes. It's going to take all of us to lick him. That's why I came back."

"What are you babbling about?" said Emerson softly. "Take your time, man. What blue color?"

"In the big room up the corridor. There's a deep roar and splashes of this deep light, as dark as a sapphire. Caught him, it did. Melted him into nothing at all. I—I can't forget it."

He unsnapped the last buckle and stood silent as Emerson got up and stretched. His chest heaved as he gasped for air.

He said suddenly, "We might as well get out of here while we can. If that thing wants to experiment on us any more—the hell with him. Let's go, and fast."

Emerson was freeing Nichols, smiling thinly, "What about your fortune, Mussdorf? What about being a boss on Mars?"

Mussdorf licked his lips, whispering, "Hell with that. I just want to get away from here, that's all. That black thing has power we've never seen, never dreamed of. I tell you, those blue bands—"

Mussdorf swore.

Emerson whirled, reaching for his solar gun.

Irgi stood in the doorway, brooding at them. Almost he seemed to shake his vast head, sadly.

"Stop him, one of you," babbled Mussdorf, striving to get past them. "Maybe one of us can get away."

The thing stretched out his tentacles so swiftly that Emerson rasped curses as his gun-arm was clapped and held tight against his side. Nichols writhed beside him in another viselike arm. Mussdorf had faintd.

Looking down at him, Emerson smiled thinly, and said to Nichols, "Whatever happened to Gunn must have been pretty bad. They told me at New Mars that Karl Mussdorf was pretty tough."

"Yeah," whispered Nichols.

Emerson looked up at the thing, studying it, thinking: maybe I can get it to listen to me. Maybe it will even let us go free if I can communicate with it.

"What're you going to do with us?" he questioned as calmly as he could.

The thing looked at him, and the thin mouth moved, but Valentine Emerson heard no sound. The thing shook his head again, sadly.

**H**E COULD NOT make these beings understand that he was helping them, Irgi realized. They cannot hear my voice because it is pitched lower than their ears can detect. And even if they heard me, they would not understand. I shall cure them of the growth disease. By that act, they will know I am friendly. Time enough then to discuss other matters. Matters like the building of a great statue to him, Irgi, greatest of the Urg.

He carried them into the Chamber of the Cones; set them down gently.

The large one with the black hair and the shaggy brows was screaming something. He was undergoing an emotion: anger. And fright, too. Yes, the black haired one was frightened. More frightened than he was angry. Irgi watched him curiously. He must have seen the little one blasted when the Cones were pulsing.

It was too bad about that, Irgi thought as he trussed them up. But these beings were so impetuous, almost childlike in their emotional hysteria. He could not let them know that the Cones were set to pulse in rhythm with his own body, not theirs. And anything foreign to that peculiar vibration—perished. It simply ceased to exist, wiped out by the flood of power loosed by the white block.

Irgi twisted dials on the instrument panel. He knew the rhythm of these creatures, and adjusted to allow for it. This time the blue beam would not harm them. Instead they would blast into nothingness the growth disease that was slowly eating away their lives.

There was danger for Irgi, too, in this. He could not remain in the Chamber to watch them. He must leave. He set the automatic regulators to begin in five parazaw, last for one azaw, then switch back. After that time, he could safely return, for the dark blue light and the roaring hum would cease, and the cones would be idle.

Irgi glanced at the three beings. The black-haired one still raved, but the others lay silent, watching him. He nodded approval. The black-haired being was trying to loosen within the others the storms of emotions that held him thrall, but they were of different stuff.

He went through the doors, and the doors slid shut.

**E**MERSON rasped, "Shut up!" They lay silent for long moments. Emerson was studying the white block and the cones and the spiralling, gleaming rings. He frowned, trying to imagine their use. A tremendous powerhouse, of some sort. Probably atomic power sucked from the white rock in some alien manner. Atomic power that beat outward from the cones in bands of visible color. Could it be

a bath of atoms, bombarding everything in the room?

Mussdorf snarled, "I tell you he's going to do away with us like he did with Gunn."

"Don't be a fool, man," answered Emerson wearily. "He wouldn't go to all this trouble just to kill us. One quick wrench with those tentacles of his, and we'd be dead ducks. He's got us in here for some reason. I'm not denying he may be experimenting on us. But there ought to be others joining with him in it. Funny, we haven't seen any others like him."

"Look," said Nichols abruptly.

The white block was radiating, pulsing, casting forth bluish beams that swept to the cones and fled outward in ever expanding arcs to splash against the walls. The blue light deepened, grew violet. It pulsed faster, swifter. And the humming of the cones was deafening.

"I don't feel anything," said Emerson. "I can still see you fellows. Whatever it was happened to Gunn isn't happening to us."

He turned; found himself free of the straps, sat up. He clambered to his feet and looked around.

"The straps that held us are gone. Disappeared. Like Gunn."

Mussdorf murmured oaths but he too got to his feet, asking, "What do we do now?"

"Stay here and see what's next on the program. I still don't believe that thing's out to harm us."

"Ahh, you always were a soft-hearted fool," Mussdorf snarled. "Why's he going to all this bother to save us? It doesn't add up. This is some fool scheme of his mad brain. He's no altruist. Not that black octopus. Gad, what a shape!"

Nichols smiled wryly, "I believe we're just as peculiar to him as he is to us. He talks and we can't even hear his voice. He may hear us, but it's a cinch he doesn't know what we're talking about. Huh, it's somewhat of a 'Never the twain shall meet' angle. East and West, and that sort of thing."

"Only it's solar and star system," agreed Emerson, walking toward the intricate control panels on the wall. He stretched an arm toward a dial—

He paused, staring.

His arm. Good Lord, his *arm!*

"Nichols! Mussdorf," he shouted, leaping for them. "Let me see your arms, your faces. Yes, you see? Mine, too. Free. Free of the lumps. They're *gone!* The bumps that mean cancer—gone. We're cured!"

They stared in awed fascination at themselves. Nichols ripped at his jacket, pulled it open, ran exploring hands over his skin. He sobbed suddenly; began hysterically to cry, shoulders shaking.

"Whatever it is, it's cured us," whispered Emerson, turning to stare upwards at the great glittering cones, that towered high above him.

"Ada and the kids," Nichols sobbed. "If they were here we could cure them too."

"The world can be freed from the Plague," Emerson breathed.

"A fortune," grinned Mussdorf, eyes glinting.

Emerson said, "If we knew how this thing worked, we could set it up on Earth. Duplicate it."

Mussdorf slid a hand over the butt of his solar gun. He smiled grimly. "At a price, commander. Think of it. We'll be billionaires. That girl in New Mars—bah! I could have girls ten times better than her, just throwing themselves at me."

"We came to do a job," Emerson said flatly, "and we're going to see it through."

Mussdorf tugged at his gun, lifting it, aiming it at Emerson's broad chest.

"I'm tired of these damned ideals of yours," he grated savagely. "You'll never change. Neither will I. The time for words is past. I'm acting—"

His finger tightened on the trigger.

And Emerson dove in at him, like a full-back at the line.

The bolt of yellow never left the muzzle of the gun. It was smothered in a cobalt-dark spray of angry color. Color that sizzled.

EMERSON brought his fist up hard, caught the big adventurer alongside his jaw, snapping his head back viciously. With hard lefts and rights, Emerson banged his fists mercilessly, swarming over Mussdorf, bruising his ribs, thudding home his big fists on jaw and belly.

Mussdorf dropped, rolled over; lashed upward with both feet.

Emerson sideswayed, drove in. His fists battered Mussdorf's jaw, rolling his head from side to side. His knuckles gashed the tight skin and drew blobs of blood. Mussdorf staggered dizzily, and pitched forward as Emerson hammered his head again.

"I put up with you long enough," he spat at the prostrate man. "After this, when I give an order, you—obey!"

Emerson bent, ripped the gun from Mussdorf; thrust it into his belt.

"But this is what we came to get," Nichols said. "This means life—security—wealth—freedom from cancer—for all the people on Earth and Mars."

"I know," Emerson nodded. "We'll have to take it."

He glanced up at the cones and shook his head. They were far too vast to carry in the spaceship. He might duplicate them if he knew how they worked, though.

"Quick," he rasped at Nichols. "Start hunting for plans—blue-prints—anything that might tell what this apparatus is, how it works, what its principle is."

They sprang about the room, searching the scrolls that hung on the walls, the inscriptions graven in stone and metal. Off in one corner, a great leaden casket lay in a niche. It was Emerson who found it, and his yelp of delight brought Nichols running.

"It's here, all here. Diagrams. Calculations. All of them worked out mathematically. They don't use our system, but it'll be easy enough to decipher theirs. We've got it, Car!"

Nichols stood with head bent, lips soundlessly moving.

"It's atomic power, all right," assured Emerson, "with that block as its source. But lord, what tremendous advances from the atomic power we know. The block is acted upon by the cones which cause it to send out streams of radio-active atoms, throwing them back to the cones that take them up in turn to hurl them all around the room.

"Matter is constantly in motion, thanks to the molecules that comprise it. They keep moving about one another eternally; in the case of solids, they just about make it. That motion is carried on at a certain rate of speed. To an extent, you might

say it vibrates at a certain pulse. If the atoms are attuned to that pulse, they feed and nourish. If the matter vibrates at a different rate than the atoms, the atoms destroy it. The straps that bound us are gone, but our clothes are unaffected. Perhaps that's because the things we wear are tuned in some manner to our own vibratory rate. Maybe it's because what we wear comes from Earth, and things from Earth have their own peculiar motion. I'm not sure, yet. But I do know anything that's in this room when the cones are set at a certain pulse either vibrates in harmony with that pulse or is wiped out of existence by the atoms that hit it. Like Gunn. Like the cancer cells that vibrated differently from our otherwise healthy bodies!"

"The block," whispered Nichols. "We'll need the block!"

"Certainly. It's radium, in all probability—perhaps treated in some manner we don't know of. But we can take it. It'll fit into this box. The box was made for it. It's lead."

The doors were opening soundlessly. Warned by eyes upon him, Emerson whirled and dove for the cone controls. He set a hand on a lever and turned to face the thing.

"I don't know whether you can hear me, fella," he grated. "But this thing is tuned to our bodies now, not yours. We want that block—" jerking his head toward the shimmering white square, "—to take with us. If you don't step aside—you die!"

"Kill him anyhow," whispered Nichols.

"Yes, you soft fool," snarled Mussdorf through swollen, cut lips from the floor. "Pull the lever and do away with him."

Emerson shook his head, still looking at the thing that stood so still in the doorway, staring back at him.

"That would be murder. He's an intelligent being. If he doesn't interfere, he stays alive."

The black monster turned, and moved off down the corridor. Emerson exhaled with relief, found his palm wet and sticky. He rubbed it on his thigh, turning to the others.

"Snap into it," he barked. "Get off the floor, Mussdorf, and give Nichols a hand. Lug that leaden box between the cones, beneath the block. I'm going to release

the pressure that keeps it suspended. We want that block. We need it. We can build the cones and the rings back on Earth, but there isn't anything like that block anywhere else in all the Universe!"

THEY worked feverishly, sliding the box across the floor. Emerson studied the control panels, sweat beading his brow with the effort of his concentration. He summoned the years of his tutelage under the world's greatest physicists at Earth University, the years of knowledge acquired in laboratory and spaceship on Earth and in the great red city of New Mars. He only had one chance here. It had to be successful. If he made a mistake, he was like to draw on them the concentrated fury of a billion annihilating atoms.

He touched levers hesitantly, frowning; striving to remember the diagrams etched in metal on the box. Here, this one. This should be it. He wrapped his fingers carefully about the gleaming white knob, turned it with infinitesimal slowness, looking at the great white block. He saw it quiver, settle slowly floorwards.

"It's in," yelled Nichols, slamming the leaden cover down and locking it.

It took the three of them to budge it, to slide it across the floor.

"Hell," panted Mussdorf. "We'll never make it. Once we get it into the corridor, that black fiend'll be on top of us again."

Somehow they got it out of the Chamber, and scraped it along the corridor. Luckily, the way was level, and the ramp that lead from the Chamber of the Cones to the great square was smooth. But in the square they ran into an unsurmountable difficulty. There was no way to lift it into the spaceship.

"We can't do it," acknowledged Emerson glumly. "It would take a crane to lift that."

Mussdorf kicked at the box, and swore. Nichols ran quivering fingers through his hair, trembling.

Then Emerson started to grin.

"A crane, sure. We have one here, if we can only make it work. The thing, the black thing. He's as strong as any crane I ever saw!"

"Think he'll do it?" asked Mussdorf.

"I can try. Maybe a threat to use the

solar blasters on him will do the trick."

He really didn't think so, recalling the way the black being had sidestepped the bolts before; but it was their only hope. He pulled his two guns and turned; stopped short, staring.

The black creature was coming down the ramp, slithering his great bulk toward them. He ignored them, heading directly toward the leaden box.

Irgi lifted the leaden casket in three of his rippling tentacles, balancing it. He moved toward the spaceship, thrust the box through the open door.

Emerson frowned. He went to the thing, touching it and looking upward into its eyes.

The thing looked down at Emerson unblinking. It pointed to the transparent globe above, then patted Emerson on his wrist with a force that nearly snapped it.

"He's going to open the globe for us. He's going to set us free!"

IRGI WATCHED the ship twinkle to a glittering dot high in the heavens. Sadly he turned and moved back along the empty corridors, once again alone.

He wished they were still here, even though he never could understand them. At least they were beings who moved, and talked among themselves, showed emotions. But what a strange world they came from! A world where heroes were worshipped, where tall strong statues were built to the great men of their race. Irgi liked that idea, though it was foreign to Urg. He rather thought there would be a statue to him, there on that planet called Earth. Yes, for the beings would tell how Irgi helped them, how he gave them the white block that would save them from extinction, even though it meant his own death, eventually.

Irgi was happy. There was no doubt of it. There would be a fine statue to him on that distant planet. Irgi, savior of the race called men. A hero to mankind, to be worshipped. He wished wistfully that he could have been there to see it. But he was afraid of unleashing those creatures' terror. They might even have done something rash to themselves, if he had crowded his bulk into the spacecraft.

No, it was better this way.



AND in the spaceship, Emerson and Mussdorf and Nichols squatted over the leaden casket, commenting on it, copying the alien symbols and designs for study.

Emerson frowned thoughtfully, choosing his words.

"As near as I can judge, it's a form of atomic bombardment of matter. Suppose its rate of vibration is adjusted to matter *a*. Anything other than matter *a*, such as foreign substance *b*, is hit so swiftly and so often by those hurtling atoms that they simply wipe it out of existence.

"Back in the twentieth century, they were using just this principle to cure cancer. They bombarded the cancer with radioactive atoms—overcrowding the atoms with neutrons beyond their ability to hold them for very long—and the atoms ate away the cancer. I think they treated other diseases too, with some success. Goiter, for one. And, if I recall rightly, the atoms could build up blood cells or eliminate them.

"But this block and the cones seem to be the ultimate perfection of that idea. Maybe atoms possess some degree of intellect, for all we know. We'll never really be sure. They do have a power of attraction, and appear to be drawn to the danger spot as though magnetized to it."

They were silent, thoughtful.

"Yeah," said Mussdorf at last. "It begins to trickle through. Gunn wasn't in harmony with that black beast, so he went out of existence immediately. Gunn was human and the other wasn't."

Emerson nodded, and his eyes widened.

"My God!" he whispered. "This block and the cones could make a man immortal!"

Mussdorf gagged; laughed suddenly.

"Then why did that thing let us cart it off right from under its nose? Why, he even helped us."

"I wish I knew," muttered Emerson, troubled. "I wish I knew."

Mussdorf scowled; looked at him sideways, clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry I went off my nut back there," he mumbled. "The thought of all the dough this thing was worth sort of slapped me haywire. Why, just to be free of space cancer, Val—and hell! They'll

give us pensions for this job. I'm sorry."

"Skip it," said Emerson. "That black thing was enough to make us all jittery. He seemed a good enough egg, though! But I was a little disappointed in him. He sure was bluffed when I touched that lever. Boy, he turned tail fast enough."

"Maybe he was just what he looked like, Val," murmured Nichols thoughtfully. "An animal—left by the real builders of the Cones to turn it over to someone like us, with a use for it."

"Sure," nodded Mussdorf. "That's what he was. Car's hit it. Just a big animal who knew enough to work the things, and no more."

IRGI was alone, and cold. It would get steadily colder for him, without the block to feed his body. But Irgi kept smiling. He would be a hero someday. There would be a statue to him.

Again he wished that he could see it. But he knew he would never be happy on Earth. There would always be the fear that the earthmen seemed to have. To Irgi, it seemed a silly sort of fright, too. They were always on the verge of harming themselves. As in the Chamber of the Cones when that one had placed his hand on the lever to loose the fury of the cones. Why had he done that? And those others urging him to pull it! Did fear turn those beings into madmen? Didn't they know that they would have blasted themselves to nothingness? They must have known that the controls would automatically shift back to his own vibratory rate, not theirs. The machine had been built for him. In rest, it was tuned to his pulse.

He had been afraid for them, and so had gone away, leaving them to slide the box as best they could. He had meant to carry it for them, since it was best that a race carry on instead of one lone Urgian. For Irgi would die without the block. Well, it was like exchanging one form of immortality for another. But he still wished he could have seen that statue.

"An animal," said Emerson heavily. "Well, maybe you're right. Just an animal, scared of three men. Let's forget him."

Irgi shivered.

It was growing colder. . . .

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Illustrated by MURPHY

## Beer-Trust Busters

By A. R. STUART

**"It's a hell of a note when one guy controls the beer situation — let's do Dudley dirty!" rang the war cry of Doc, Listless and Outhouse. And the intrepid trio went blearily about the business of dirtying Dudley—empty bottles marking their trail.**

**W**E PULLED into the spaceport with the asteroid in tow. Platinum—20%. Very nice. We cleared our papers and sold the deposit

for a tidy sum. There was only one thing to do and we did it.

"Three beers," said Outhouse. Six feet four he was and built like one. The

bartender brought them over. None of those mechanical mixers for us like they have in the high class joints. We like human company. Maybe that's why I'm always fighting with Outhouse Murphy and Listless Lomack.

"Nice spotting on that asteroid, Doc," said Listless, downing his beer in a gulp and ordering three more, all for himself. "It's nice to have an astrophysicist in the crew. Sometimes you actually have a purpose."

"More than a third class navigator," I yipped. But I was feeling pretty good. We all were. Money in our pockets, a good ship to roam around in and the best of company. We sat around over more beer, discussing plans for a real bender of which this was only the beginning, as you might say. When we finally picked out what we wanted to do, we called for the bill.

Murphy picked it up and set it down.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Look," he commanded.

I added up the column and checked the total. Then I thought back over the number of drinks we'd had. Listless pulled out a pocket slipstick but I didn't need it.

"The price," I said in a hushed whisper, "has doubled."

Listless turned to the bartender.

"What's the idea?" he asked. The guy shrugged.

"That's the latest," he said. "I can't help it. I gotta pay more, I gotta charge more."

"Who's your supplier?" asked Outhouse.

"Drake," said the bartender.

Murphy turned to us.

"I got suspicions," he informed us. "I got to go chase 'em up. I'll be back in a little while."

Listless and I debated whether to order more. It was almost cheaper to drink hard liquor but we decided that discretion was the better part of hangover and stuck to beer.

We hung around for about an hour and finally the door was shadowed by Murphy's tremendous form. If an elephant can slide, Murphy slid onto a stool. He ordered a couple and turned to us.

"Well, boys, what do you think of the doings of Dirty Dudley?"

Listless and I looked at each other.

"Dudley D. Drake, young tycoon; embezzled from his father, sold short on his brother and now controls the beer situation."

"Oh," we said among other unprintables, "that is a fine, tender, sore spot with us, Outhouse. How come?"

"I'm not sure but from what I heard down at the alumni house it has something to do with the malting process. I think he's got a law passed or something like that. He had enough influence and he's nasty enough. In college we used to call him the 'Doctor of the Doublecross,'"

"You mean you know the punk?" I asked.

"Yeah. He tried to get my place on the wrestling team once. He dropped a table on me from the second floor." A dreamy smile played over the lips of an amused Outhouse.

"What happened?" asked Lomack.

"Oh, I caught it and threw it back up at him. Very messy. But he stayed away from me after that. I haven't seen him in six or seven years. And now he starts treading on my toes again. To say nothing of you two souses. I think it's time to renew an old acquaintance. Let's go."

WE FOLLOWED him out into the street and caught a 'copter to the Drake building. A beautiful job in steelite and stone, like the Drake heart, I gathered. The stone was only for effect, the steelite held it up. We settled down on the roof, got out and paid the driver. We walked up to the reception clerk. Murphy took it from there.

"Mr. Drake is too busy to receive visitors," said the clerk at the desk. "I'm sorry."

He really was, too, when Murphy leaned over and put one big hand completely around his neck.

"Look," said Murphy, "you just call him on the viewer and tell him that Outhouse is here to finish a job on a table. He'll see us."

The clerk tried to gulp but Murphy's fingers were in the way of his epiglottis. So he nodded his head. He was released with caution but there wasn't any need for that now. The clerk picked up the dial and called Drake. Dudley's face

appeared on the screen. Dark and handsome he was like a long snake, with a little trick mustache that looked like an old time toothbrush.

"What is it?" he snapped. "You know I'm busy."

"There's something about a table, sir, and an outhouse"—the receptionist started, but Drake caught sight of Murphy's features shoved in front of the screen.

"Hello, Dudley," cooed Murphy. "Think you'll be able to see me? I wouldn't refuse if I were you." Murphy picked up that poor operator and gestured with him. "Remember the table, Dudley? You wouldn't want me to do that to this poor fellow, would you? And besides, I've got a couple of geniuses with me. We want to talk to you about beer."

Drake sat back in his chair and grinned a nasty grin.

"It's all right, Harkness," he directed. "Send them down."

The clerk lay limply back in the chair and pointed voicelessly toward a private elevator. Murphy pointed a finger at him.

"Remember, please, that I am a proper noun. When you say Outhouse, don't put 'an' in front of it." We bowed courteously and stalked off.

The elevator was waiting for us. We got in, and it slipped soundlessly down to Drake's office. He was sitting waiting for us, his elbows on the desk, hands clasped together. He didn't bother to get up when we came in. Nor even offer chairs.

"Enter one Outhouse," he said, "and two crummy friends. I am delighted."

I excite easily. I started to hop up and down. But Murphy put a hand on my shoulder and I staggered to a rest. So I decided to turn on the brain, while Outhouse handled the other stuff.

"What's the dope on this beer business?" asked Murphy.

"Pretty simple," said Drake. "There has been a law passed just recently and tucked away in the files where it will not be noticed, unless, of course, there should be a need for it. The gist of it is that all malting done on the planet must be carried on under government supervision. That means strict control of course. The purest grains, the most carefully con-

trolled processes, all that sort of thing. And if any detail is overlooked or found not satisfactory, a rather large fine is incurred. I own the larger part of the malting plants as you well know, although there are some others. They won't offer much trouble however, for you see, I am the government supervisor."

I started to swear and again Murphy reached over, this time over my mouth. Then he pointed to a recorder disc. Clever guy, Dudley. If I'd said what I was going to say he could have put me up for the rest of my life and probably would.

Drake smiled and clicked off the switch.

"Now you can say what you like," he told me. "Nice of me, isn't it?"

"We will keep the conversation on friendly terms," directed Murphy, "just in case."

"Now to get down to business. It is our intention to bust your combine. Perhaps you would like to buy us off?" We hadn't thought of it till then but it sounded like a good idea. Listless and I nodded.

Drake sneered.

"How?" he asked. "I've got the Earth covered. And the other planets haven't the necessary conditions. The cloud layers on Venus keep out most of the sunlight and Mars and the rest of the outer planets are too far away. You're welcome to try Mercury."

Sure, Mercury would be swell. It's either too hot or too cold. He had us stopped all right. But—crumbs! I was sore.

"We're starting this cold," I yipped, "but we're gonna take you over the oleos and blow you out our jets. You should have bowed low when we came in. You didn't know you were talking to a group of experts." I included Murphy and Listless grandly. I'm really the smart guy in the bunch but I didn't have to tell that to Drake. I knew I was good, that was sufficient.

Drake laughed.

"Go ahead and try," he said.

"Let's go, guys," I told them. We slammed out of the office, catching a last glimpse of Drake's nasty look as the elevator door closed. We traveled to the landing level, bade the clerk a pleasant goodbye after we pulled him out from under the desk, and hailed a 'copter.

"Big talk, Doc," sighed Listless when we were seated at a quiet little midtown bar. "But how are you going to do it?"

"I dunno," I said, "but give me time."

WE WERE taking a jog around the track. It being a nice warm sunny day, Listless had decided that what we needed was to work some of the alcohol out of our systems. I objected, but was roped in anyway. Murphy merely sniffed. With his build he was immune. However he said he needed some fresh air so he would come along and hold a timer on us. Listless protested but I said swell. That's Listless for you; "Come on, Doc. Let's run off a couple of fast miles." Sure. Until somebody comes along to check up on him. Then he starts making excuses. But the two of us dragged him along.

So here we were on the city track, along with half a dozen other undeveloped individuals, pounding around a cinder path in the park, each of us trying to breathe so the other wouldn't hear and feel the jar clear up to the occiput every time a foot came down. This must be awful on Listless' toes, I thought. He likes to wiggle 'em every time he gets in the pilot seat.

On the third lap, Murphy started yelling and swinging his arm.

"Come on, Lomack, oil your oleos. Chase him, Doc. You guys are doing time."

Listless stuck out his chest and lengthened his stride but soon came back to the old stumble. I'm built pretty light so it didn't bother me much. I just stepped up the pace with him but I didn't slow down when he did. So I was looking at the timer, my head stuck under Murphy's arm when Listless broke an imaginary tape with his nose.

"How'd we do?" he panted when he got his breath.

"Swell," Outhouse enthused. "Sixty seconds less and you'd have only been a minute over the record."

"Oh," said Lomack.

"Yeah?" I said. "Oh. And what's more, Listless, you tentacle-toed ape, I got an idea running around that track. I think, I think, I really think, that we can do Dudley dirty."

"What is it?" queried Murphy.

"I'm not saying yet," I replied. "I've got to think it over for a while and examine the holes."

"Moth holes?" said Listless.

"Nuts," said I.

"Marbles," said Outhouse. "Keep it to yourself, Doc, if you want to."

"Well," said Listless slowly, "I bet one thing. I bet whatever it is, I gotta navigate."

"You not only gotta navigate," I replied, "you gotta navigate *well*."

"Now listen—"

"Now listen, nothing," I screeched. "Not only will this bust up Dear Old Dudley's beer combine but it will also be a wonderful, beautiful, perfect demonstration of—"

"Of what?" asked Outhouse enticingly.

"Never mind," I said cunningly, "we'll let that take care of itself when the time comes."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said Listless, who got his name because he's lazy, though he says it's because he can hold his liquor, "he's got another half throttled idea which means I'll be back to work at the old slipstick."

"That's the trouble with you, Listless," I said haughtily. "You're limited to the depth of an astroplex navigator. Now take the thoughts of a real scientist." Here I strutted a bit. "You never could understand anything deeper than *Arctic Nights*. But a brain—like me—" I added modestly. "People will stand and point in awe when—"

"The model scientist," sneered Lomack, "meaning of course, a small imitation of the real thing."

I let out a howl and went for him. We were all set for a nice scrap when Murphy broke it up.

"Now," he said, "if you two specimens of would-be manhood are going to shower and dress, get to it. I gotta date."

"Glass, bottle or demijohn?" I asked from my tangled position. He stalked off. Then I untangled Listless' fingers from my hair and unwrapped his legs from around my middle, thus taking the pressure off him and letting him up. He took his teeth from around my forefinger and admitted that I had him licked. That's



one thing I like about Lomack; when he's beaten he admits it.

I MADE a nifty little jog to the locker room while Listless limped along behind. We showered, got our loafer suits out of the lockers, and feeling pretty swell, sauntered out into a soft evening.

"Boy," breathed Listless, "taking a deep breath as though he hadn't had enough on the track, 'this is lovely. Let's go find Murphy.'"

Which meant a bender of course. For, as I have mentioned, Murphy is a man with all the physical capabilities of a three-year-old gorilla on a hashish jag. And if you wonder at the strange figures of speech we sometimes use, it is because Murphy was once an archaeologist who taught languages and made a side line specialty of ancient idioms. Until he got tired of teaching college boys and associating with professors. He was always hurting someone in wrestling, boxing or social intercourse so he finally dropped the whole business and went on a tear. Lomack and I picked him up in a low orbit space dive. He found us not repugnant and we rather enjoyed his finesse in a fight so we stuck together. When he wasn't off on a bat.

"Where to?" I asked.

"You know better than that," I was admonished. "You mean where first."

"Just plain *where* is even better," I concluded.

He took from his pocket a bunch of those little plastic souvenirs they put on bottles—he had plenty of opportunity to swipe them—and picked out five with the names of bars on them.

"I'll toss 'em up," he explained, "and you grab one when they come down. That'll be a starter."

So in the soft, yellowish red rays of a late and tired sun I watched while he turned three times to the west, went through the motions of blowing a beer head and tossed up his hand. The light tinkled quietly on the crystal clear figures as they soared lazily upward against a darkening blue. Spinning and tumbling they reached the zenith of flight and slowly gained velocity as they returned to the mother of all—but I wax poetic. I reached out my hand and snatched one.

"*Benny's Barometric Beer*," it read.

"I remember that joint," mused Listless. "They adjust the gas pressure to equal outside pressure. Result—no burp."

"Even in thunderstorms?" I asked.

"Automatic pressure regulator."

So we went to Benny's. That's a nice quiet place downtown. As a rule, we don't go for the rainbow palaces and throne rooms that cater to the more exclusive and less interesting trade. All they ever have is acrobatic dancing at quarter gravity and stuff that Murphy could do at 3g's without straining anyone but me. And besides, with Dudley in control, the beer in those places would probably cost us half a credit. So we went to *Benny's* and Murphy wasn't there. Then we went to the *Sun Spot* and the only thing we recognized was the rise in price. We hit three or four more places but they were all modernized—no Outhouse. I was beginning to get sore about the rise in the cost of living. And Listless didn't seem to know what it was all about. After the fourth joint he started to argue with the bartenders. Which didn't do a bit of good because in those particular places, the bartenders were automatics. Finally we sallied into the *Solar Spin Club* and walked, stalked or clambered up to the bar. The regular customers walked, Listless stalked and I clambered.

THE CLUB was a pretty good bet because it has an old-fashioned bar in the rear for those who like to tell their trouble to a bartender who is deaf. Nobody knew that except a couple of us. Next to the bar were some tables. At one of these sat Brother Dudley and a couple of friends. Looking very disconsolate. Standing at the less brightly lit end of the bar were three lovely ladies laughing hysterically at one, broad Outhouse.

"He's telling dirty jokes again," I sniffed.

"Sometimes," sighed Listless, "I wish I had studied the more cultural subjects. It helps."

"Helps what?" I demanded. "Anybody can do Drake. And anyway, you never met anyone who could appreciate them."

He started to grin in a nasty way.

"Present company excepted," I yipped.

"You know what I mean. Don't try to get high-handed with me, you swizzle. I'm over your head like a Heavyside Layer." Then I calmed down.

"This isn't going to make Dudley feel any too friendly toward us," mused Listless, giving the three solos at the table the once-over.

"Look at him," I said. "He doesn't feel good to anybody, ever. We should worry."

"Two beers," I ordered, ruefully



counting out the exorbitant amount I had learned was necessary. Drake seemed to brighten a little at that. Going right out of our pockets into his, the bum.

We stoked our holds in a hurry, ordered a couple more and gave Outhouse the high sign.

He started toward us and the bevy of beauties followed along automatically. Reminded me of a barnyard.

"Hi, folks," he greeted us. "Look what I got it." The three girls giggled. Drake and his buddies sat and brooded. I kept an eye on them just to see when things got started. Listless was aware of them

too, 'cause I saw him tenderly feel his hip pocket for his applicator. That's what he called it. But Murphy had told him about that gadget. He said it was called a brass knuckle in the old days. Listless of course, had to be high-toned and make it out of plastic on his little press.

The more we talked and laughed and the noisier we got, the glummer the other three became. I guess they wanted silence. Finally they looked at each other. I gave Murphy the nudge.

"Routine Three," I whispered. I loved that one. And we weren't feeling too frisky yet. Not that we wanted to avoid a fight, you understand, but we had two more days of healthy drinking to do if we wanted to preserve our record. Murphy nodded his agreement to my suggestion and I strolled over to the slot machine control and put a coin in the smoothest, dreamiest, slowest dance number I could pick out. The music controlled the gravity strength of the floor, and with that piece I knew there wouldn't be enough field to flatten a quart of quicksilver. Outhouse carefully detached his arm from where it was, made sure there was plenty of room then turned and thumbed his nose at the boys. They snarled and jumped for him.

Tsk, tsk, I thought, is that what Dudley learned in college? For Murphy bent his knees, stretched out his arms and gathered them in. In two steps he made the dance floor and tossed them gently up over it. While they scrambled and twisted, weightlessly, trying to get down, we grabbed the three girls. All of us charged through the door and into a 'copter.

"Now where?" asked Lomack after we had lost ourselves in a traffic level.

"Any place where we can test Drake's products," I told him. "Then the next time we meet him we'll really have something to yell about."

"C'MON, DOC. Wake up! Something's happened."

"Hrrmph, brrrp, splat, phtooey," I replied as intelligibly as was possible under the circumstances. I opened my eyes and couldn't see a thing.

"Snap out of it. Hurry up." It was Listless' voice whispering through the darkness.

I groped around and found a light switch. I pushed it. There was a tremendous flash as the world disintegrated. I jumped up, banged my head against something and flopped back half dead. I heard Lomack laughing fit to kill. The ape. The lights went on. He was doubled over alongside my berth back in the ship. I looked at the light fixture. He'd taken out the regular element and substituted a flash lamp.

"Very funny," I moaned, rubbing my head where I had hit it against the upper bunk. "Lucky you didn't blind me for life." I slipped back under the covers, turned over and was all set for another snooze when I remembered. I sat up in a hurry.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Two days later," said Listless. I relaxed. We were O. K. then. I was afraid for a moment that we had gone soft. But two days isn't so bad. That's a lot of beer and, I shivered, a hell of a lot of credits.

I staggered out of the berth, put on some clothes and went to the galley. Murphy was still eating. I reached for the bacon. No pills for us, not while they still grow pigs. There was silence while we shoveled it in. After the second cup of coffee, I sat back and gave forth with a big sigh.

"Now," I said, "it is time to consider more serious things."

"Like Dirty Dudley," put in Listless.

"My old college chum," remarked Out-house.

"And the idea you had in the park the other day," added Lomack.

"What is it?" asked Listless. "A new theory that will set the astrologers back on their ears?"

"No," I replied. "It's not a new theory. It's an old and accepted one. But nobody ever thought of testing it out. That's what I want to do. And in testing it we will beat the beer combine at their own game. This will get us much praise from the thinking population as well as all good beer drinkers."

"He means the Society of Astrophysicists," said Murphy. He turned to me. "You and that bunch. You're dead and don't know it."

"Yeah," said Listless, "moping around

a bunch of archives in dusty old halls. You oughta go there and bury yourself, Doc."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," I yelled. To think of a grown man like me acting that way. Sometimes I get disgusted with myself. But not in this bunch. They always beat me to it.

"Lemme talk." I outlined the details of the plan without giving away the fundamental idea. When I had finished, Listless leaned back and groaned.

"I knew it," he said. "I gotta make five hauling trips before I even get started figuring orbits. Whenever you have an idea, Doc, it's just one load after another. And what are you going to do with them after you get them set up out there?"

"I'll tell you when we're ready," I said. "And don't worry about the orbits. I'll figure those. I couldn't trust you with such a delicate task."

"I always knew you went around in circles, Doc," complained Murphy, "but this is the first time I ever saw it come out literally."

"Not circles, you culture hound, ellipses as any student would know."

"And what, may I ask again, is the purpose of this little venture?" Lomack was trying to be funny.

"In addition to dishing Dudley," I replied calmly, "I'm going to demonstrate that Einstein was right."

As we walked past the striped side of the ship to set out for supplies I glanced at the bow. We were in! Childishly printed, showing that one of us had been blotto, I read: "*Beerbuster*," sprawled on the bow plate. The previous name, "*Zebra*," the remnant of a five-day drunk, had been obliterated by the simple process of smearing catsup on it. The ship was all ready to go.

So were we.

WE WERE out in free space beyond Pluto's orbit towing a third load of asteroids; four big, juicy ones, taking them to the empty region we'd picked for the job. I was doing the piloting, pretty routine once the course was picked. Listless was back in the store room checking over the equipment we had picked up on this trip and, incidentally, giving his toes a rest. He twiddles his lowest extremities

so much when he pilots that after a while he gets cramps and has to quit. Wears hell out of his socks that way. I heard him yell as he stubbed one of his darlings against a plate. We had half a dozen plates back there with specially designed foundations. They were to go on the asteroids and Listless had figured out an embedding foundation to fasten the plates to the rocky surfaces we had to deal with. We'd left Murphy out with the fifteen we'd already carted. Which might sound dangerous to Murphy, but in spite of what I say, Listless is a mighty good navigator and can find a comet in a dark nebula if he wants to.

We came up to the cluster and spotted Murphy soaring about with a plate in one hand. He saw us and tried to wave the plate but only succeeded in wiggling himself. Those big plates, with disintegration chambers attached have plenty of inertia.

Two of the rocks on which he had completed the job were separated. I surrendered the controls to Lomack who swung the ship around and sent the four we were towing swinging toward the rest of the pile. Then he jumped the ship at the right moment and they came to a stop not twenty feet from the others. Nice shooting, I thought, although I wouldn't admit it. Murphy came across to the ship and we started unloading the plates.

The machinists had done a beautiful job. To standard plates they had added the fuel chamber and encased the whole in a shell of steelite. From this shell projected the adjustable pincer clamps which would dig into the solid rock and set immovably, making a rigid base for operations. They were full-sized, liner plates and we estimated three to an asteroid in a tripod formation which would give any orbit I was likely to want.

We tied them in a convenient hollow and went on an inspection trip to see how Murphy had made out with his installations. Listless checked angles and tested foundations.

"Looks O. K., Doc," he commented. "Think you have enough mass?"

I counted. Nineteen.

"Let's make it an even twenty," I decided. "We can tie the rest of the plates on in back and we won't have to load and

unload. You go back and get them while Murphy and I fix up a couple more."

Listless hopped back to the ship and beat it for the asteroid belt. I set out with Murphy, two plates and a hand excavator. We picked out spots, bored holes for the pincers, set the points and exploded the charges that drove them home. I stepped back to look it over. It was a nice idea. Space ships to order in any conceivable size. And these little babies were going to nip Dudley right where the hair was short. We made several more trips to the stock pile and stopped once for a rest and sleep before the ship came back.

Murphy called my attention to it.

"He's coming in," he said over the space phone. I turned to look. The *Beerbuster* was starting her spin. Suddenly Murphy grabbed me.

"Out of the way," he yelled. "That slipstick expert miscalculated his stop."

I stood and stared at the load of plates aimed straight at my head. Outhouse threw me one way and jumped the other. But the bundle came to a stop about twenty-five feet over us.

THE AIR LOCK opened and Lomack stepped out, a big grin on his face. He jumped toward us with the tie line in his hand. I picked up my excavator by the wrong end and started for him.

"You did that on purpose, you undernourished breakfast," I gritted, diving for him. He stepped out of my way and I landed on a sharp-edged rock with a very tender part of my anatomy.

"Hold it, Doc, until you see what I brought back." He made the ship fast and ducked back in the air lock. He came out with a case.

"Here y'are, Doc. Catch." The box sailed through space into my waiting arms. I caught the Drake label on the side.

"And there are five more like it in the stock room."

"Well," I hesitated. "In that case, I'll excuse you," I told him. I tossed it back and jumped after it. Murphy followed. He could smell beer through that helmet. We took off our suits and had a good stretch. Then we opened up. Lovely, lovely bottles. But not half so good as

our beer was going to be we told each other.

"I thought you boys would like a little refreshment," Listless expanded under our praise. "But I didn't want to interfere with work so I held it down to half a dozen."

We went through the first two and then Outhouse and I had a good sleep in the ship's bunks while Lomack went out to look around and fiddle a bit. When we woke up we felt like a million, and it wasn't long before the three of us had the rest of the plates installed and ready to run.

We turned in for a final nap before the big day.

I woke up as nervous as a Martian juju. This was it. Listless was sitting at the control box, when I came in from breakfast, fingers ready to press the buttons tied into the plate chambers. Murphy was running around the ship putting up filters over observation ports at my suggestion. They still didn't have an inkling of what I was shooting at.

"O. K.," I choked. "Let 'er go."

Listless pressed the main contact. The box warmed up with a steadily rising hum. The little lights blinked on and the main panel showed the location of each asteroid. I read the figures off to him and his fingers ran over the board more nervously than his toes would ever go. The dots of light on the indicator panel started slowly in motion. They built up speed, flashing faster and faster around the two focal points I had calculated.

"Take an observation," I told Murphy, sweating.

He shot a glance out of the bow port, filter in his hand, ready to slap it on.

"No stuff yet," he reported.

The asteroids were revolving dizzily now.

Suddenly a tremor passed through the ship.

"There she goes!" I screamed. Murphy's eyes bugged out against the transparent plate.

"There's something out there, Doc," he yelled. "Light by all that's uncontrollable. It's getting bigger. And brighter!" Lomack was still madly balancing the orbits, speeding up the asteroids like rocks on strings. A burst of brilliance came

streaming through the forward observation. Murphy put up the filter.

I sat back with a breath of deep, deep relief.

"There you are, boys," I wheezed. "One sun as per specification. Completely under control. Lomack, if your fingers were fast enough we could use it for a blinker. All you have to do is control the speeds the right way."

**L**ISTLESS had established equilibrium by now, and threw over the box to automatic. He went back to the store room and brought out the last case. We sat down and drank to my health. Several times. And to my brain. Often.

"How'd you figure it?" asked Murphy when the back pounding was over.

"Boys," I said in a superior tone, "it's really very simple." Murphy threw the opener at me, so I got down to business.

"You both know the rudiments of Einstein, don't you?" I asked. They nodded in agreement.

"Well, you know the theory of space, warp. Not the way the plates work but the fundamental proposition. Gravity does not exist as such. I mean there is no actual attraction between the sun and the planets. The sun is of such tremendous mass that it warps space elliptically around it in such a way that any body of a given mass and speed just has to travel a certain way. Instead of speaking of orbits, you might say, that, like marbles, the planets fall into certain grooves and there they stay."

I stopped for a long one.

"As I was saying, I thought that if the sun establishes grooves for the planets to travel in, what would happen if we establish the grooves by means of planets without a sun? Why, it follows as the noon the morning that with the conditions just right, a sun would have to come into existence. When we started those asteroids whizzing around we created a sort of 'mass vacuum' in the center, and mass just had to rush in to fill it. Or maybe it isn't even mass; just energy with an apparent mass due to an apparent attraction. Anyway, there's your sun. We can sell lots. We go to the boys and ask them how big a plant they want to build, government supervision doesn't hold in

free space you know, so we can go in, snag an asteroid of the right size and set it up in a slow orbit around our little power plant. Charges will be reasonable but sufficient. And all the free beer we want."

Listless belched hopefully.

"That's very important," put in Murphy.

"You win the brass plated bus bar, Doc," conceded Listless. "But, oh boy, if it hadn't worked."

"The thing to do now," said the ever-practical Murphy, "is to set up a couple of choice locations. Listless, how about hopping back to the Belt and picking up a nice, big, round rock to set up the first plant on?"

"It's okay with me," Listless agreed.

"I don't like to leave the set up yet," I protested. "I'm not sure of the equilibrium point. Let's take that control out to One and set it up there. Murphy and I will stick there and keep our eyes on the system until you get back. I can handle any slight variables that may show up."

So we put up a dome on the first planetoid and moved the control equipment into it. With enough food and an air supply to last a couple of days, we decided that Listless could head straight for Earth and see if he could interest one of the lesser brewers in our plan.

After Listless had gone, Murphy and I sat around lazily, telling each other what we would do after we got the beer industry running smoothly. We puttered around with our minds, taking an occasional glance at the new sun, dropping off for a cat nap when we felt like it. I was in the middle of one of those when Murphy woke me up shaking my shoulder.

"Huh?" I said sleepily.

"Get up, Doc, there's a ship coming in." I rubbed my eyes and gazed out through the dome port. It wasn't the *Buster*. There were no stripes on it. And this ship had different lines.

It seemed to be searching for something. Stopping here and there among the whirling planetoids, like a huge shark smelling for game, the pilot must have spotted the gleam of our dome, for suddenly he headed right for us.

**I** JUMPED into my spacecalls just ahead of Murphy. We didn't know who it was, but I had a darned good idea. Something told me that our long delayed visit from Drake was about to arrive.

The ship pulled in close to headquarters, the lock opened and three figures appeared. Hooking in their lines they sailed over to us.

As they came closer I could make out Dudley's handsome features. With an expression on them I didn't like. The other two just looked familiar.

"Hello, Outhouse," he sneered. "You too, genius. I must admit you did it. It's really too bad that your sun isn't stable, isn't it?"

I started to bridle.

"Whaddayamean, not stable?" I roared. "You know damn well that I know damn well that that sun is stable as space itself."

"I said it wasn't stable, didn't I? How's a small sun like that going to stand up under the atomic bomb we're going to plant in it? Take it easy, Outhouse!"

For Murphy had started to place his feet for a spring. But he couldn't do anything against the paralyzers that suddenly appeared in the hands of Dudley's henchmen. I remembered them now. No hope in that direction. They were the two whose girls we had taken back in the *Solar Spin Club*. They must have had an interest in Drake's business 'cause I can't see knocking a guy off for stealing your girl. I guess they took that sort of thing seriously though, they got such few opportunities from the looks of them.

"Now that we have that settled, I guess we know what we can expect," said Murphy.

"That's right," said Drake silkily. "We are going to aim the bomb right at the center of your little beer plant. Where's your partner?"

We looked at each other. Then we turned back to Drake and shrugged.

"No spikka da English," we said.

Drake's voice hardened. I didn't like the sound of it.

"Where did he go? Come across or you'll be here to watch that bomb go off."

The two pleasant customers he'd brought with him didn't even bat an eye. I guess



they were pretty used to his dealings.

I was beginning to get hot. That's a habit with me. I started to jump up and down, as well as I could with no gravity for the down.

"Dirty Dudley, you dastard—" I started but that was as far as I got. He stepped forward and slapped the side of my helmet with the butt of a paralyzer he pulled out of his belt. In the close confines of the plastecle casing it sounded like all the tail plates in Space Port One had dropped on me all at once. When I recovered and got up, Drake was covering Murphy carefully with the paralyzer and the other two guys were getting ready to jump back to the ship. For the bomb, I guessed. Drake turned to me.

"A couple more cracks like that and your ears won't be much good," he told me. "Better take it easy with your tongue."

I started to sputter but a glance from Outhouse silenced me. I guess he knew Drake better than I did, although I was beginning to catch up with him.

Drake cautiously started to throw his eyes around.

"Well, where is he?"

"We don't know," I popped up, sticking out my head, literally.

"I didn't ask you," said Drake, giving me a dirty look and casting a speculative eye over my helmet.

"That's the straight dope, Drake," said Murphy, backing me up. "Lomack is behind the whole thing and he wouldn't tell us what he intends to do."

"Don't kid me." Dirty Dudley was great on sneers. "You guys wouldn't put all the time and work and money in this if you didn't know what you were doing."

"Yeah, we would," said Outhouse. "That's something you wouldn't understand, Drake. We trust each other."

I thought he was going to get bad again but he only smiled.

"Go ahead," he advised, "and see where it gets you."

ALL THIS TIME I knew that Murphy was just waiting his chance to jump at Drake when suddenly the expression on his face told me that something was up. I didn't dare turn around but I shifted for comfort and managed to trip. As I picked myself up under

Drake's watchful scrutiny I cast a quick one over my shoulder. It was the *Beer-buster*, once *Zebra*, coming in with a tail of one asteroid trailing along behind. I didn't know what to do. Listless, unarmed, was going to walk right into a trap. For I wasn't too sure that Drake was going to take us off when the bomb let loose. Why should he? A nice experiment, three fine boys busted up. Don't do it again, says the government. He'd be in the clear.

But Lomack must have had his eyes peeled and his toes socked, for he shifted into an orbit instead of coming straight in.

In the meantime, Drake had spotted him, too, and had called his men on the space phone. They had the bomb all set.

"Bring that thing over here and then get back on board," yelled Drake. The two men gingerly picked up the globe and jumped daintily for us. They came to a gentle stop, set it down, and beat it hastily for the ship again. Drake called Listless.

"Hey, you space bum! This is Drake. I've got your two buddies under control down here. Leave your ship and come on in or they won't last much longer. Don't try anything funny or I'll knock them off right now."

Murphy and I listened tensely. There was silence for a moment.

"Brrrack!" said Listless. It was the prettiest sound.

Drake was taken aback. For the moment it took to get started he couldn't think of an adequate reply. That was all the time Listless needed. Murphy and I stood in open-mouthed admiration at what came next. I could almost see Listless' stiff toes bursting through his socks.

From traveling in a short orbit, the tail of the *Beerbuster* was standing out at right angles to the direction of flight. In a moment, Listless had flicked on the side plates, swung the ship around tail first and farther so that the asteroid followed through in a sweeping arc and headed straight for us. Drake stood in stunned astonishment; and because Drake was the brains, the two bums stood in the port of their ship and just looked. Which was their very hard luck.

# PS's Feature Flash

**FLASHING** you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

But first, we'd like to explain that, when reading this, we were first amused, then distressed, then downright distrustful. This guy Shaw is a menace, a borer from within. In fact, the clincher, we think, is his last statement. Still we can't throw this out, because it's a—

## PAID POLITICAL AD

This Peacock guy is illogical. I told him nobody had ever heard of me, but he insisted that I write this just the same so that everybody *would* hear of me. I could have told him that nobody ever reads the Feature Flash anyway, but why destroy the few illusions he has left?

Not that I'm modest. I'm not even afraid to tell my age, as most fans seem to be. I'll be twenty when you read this, although I'm a mere child of nineteen at the time of typing. Most of those years were spent in the quaint little town of Schenectady, New York, but now I've taken up residence in the quaint little town of New York City, same state. I think I'll stay. Maybe only God could make a tree, but only MAN could make a place like this, and I'll gladly trade all the trees available (including Martian Skwirlchle-trees) for New York's high reaches, deep canyons, and subterranean depths. Don't mind me; it's just one of my few passions coming to the fore. Another important one is for anything and everything connected in the remotest way with writing, editing, and publishing (plus secondary interests in art and the like). Outside of those two, and that weird unclassifiable affliction called s-f fandom, I have absolutely no vices, unless you want to count those I share with all the rest of Earth's population: eating, sleeping, smoking, drinking, the opposite sex, and several others, including a few I haven't discovered yet. Definitely unathletic, I try to make up for it by feeble attempts at being intellectual. And, oh yes, my political views lean strongly toward the "radical."

So I will continue to go up and see this Peacock guy as often as possible. Some day Fiction House will get wise to him and toss him out on his very adequate ear. On that welcome day, little Larry is going to be all set to stop in and take over. I'll gladly receive bribes now to accept that pet story of yours when and if. . . .

LARRY SHAW.

THE ASTEROID finished up its arc smack against Drake's ship. Like a gigantic hammer it smashed and crumpled the plates and the heat of the collision flashed into brilliant orange. The two boys on Drake's side, for once not stopping for orders, had left but they had forgotten about their lines. When the mass of rock hit, they were jerked like live fish on the ends of leaders. We heard them scream through the mike and then they were silent.

I laughed; I couldn't help it, desperate as the situation was. Dirty Dudley was really getting smeared—but good.

In the meanwhile Outhouse had wasted neither energy nor purpose in gathering Drake in while his attention was concentrated on ducking. Dirty Dudley didn't have a chance. I caught the paralyzer as it flew my way. But I didn't need it. Drake was out. Murphy had clonked him on the helmet with a metal-clad excavator. I was avenged.

Listless got the tail under control and brought the rock in the usual way. He swung it nicely over our heads and put it nicely next to us. I didn't even duck. Then he opened the lock and came across. There were two other men with him.

"What happened?" he asked. I told him. He went over and took a look at Drake and stirred him with his foot.

"Good thing I brought witnesses," he remarked. Then he introduced us to the other two and told us that they were interested in starting a brewery around our private light.

"It would have been very nice," said Parker, the senior partner, "to get away from Drake. He was slowly driving us out of business. Now of course, he won't offer any trouble. So I guess we'll stick to Earth."

My heart sank.

"Just the same, I like it out here. How about letting me take over one of your planets for a private home?"

It was a thought. Private homes, private grounds, private planets. No looking over your neighbor's fences.

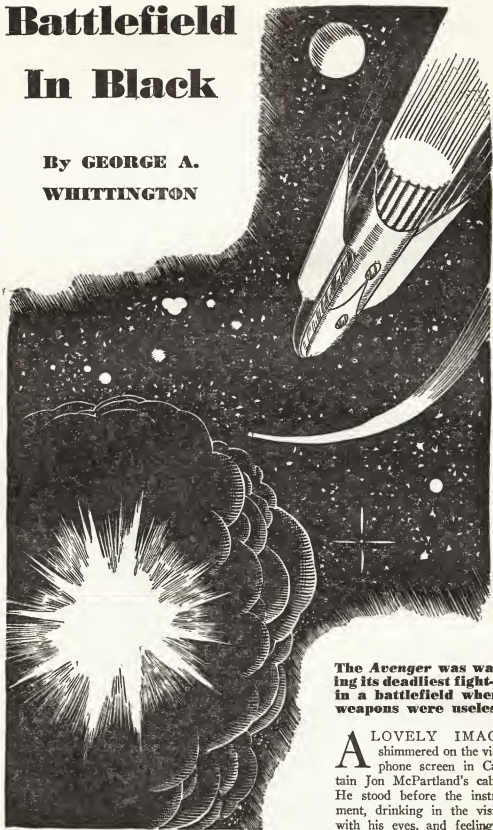
Sure.

The hell with the beer.

We'd go in for real estate.

# Battlefield In Black

By **GEORGE A.  
WHITTINGTON**



**The Avenger was waging its deadliest fight—in a battlefield where weapons were useless.**

**A** LOVELY IMAGE shimmered on the visaphone screen in Captain Jon McPartland's cabin. He stood before the instrument, drinking in the vision with his eyes, and feeling it race through his blood like a

rocket wash. But his square jaw was set in a determined line, and his big hands were clenched hard.

The vision was Almira Denton, whose hair was a red-gold nebula, whose eyes were the cool green of Terra itself. To Jon McPartland, she was much more than just the daughter of his superior, Marshal Denton, Supreme Commander of all Solar System forces.

A memory of her soft lips had been with him through long weeks of dangerous outer planet patrol. Now, bringing his sleek battle cruiser, *Avenger*, howeward, he reached toward her over maximum visa-phone range. Jon tried to keep anger from his blue eyes as he answered her suggestion.

"Almira, I don't care if you are a full-blown psychologist now and aching to qualify for the Congress of Specialists! You can't make a case report out of me."

"Now, Jon, dear," pleaded the girl softly, "you know how father needs help with Congress. Our scientists make the laws—but they think of science, and neglect System Defenses. I could make them listen!"

There was persuasion in her throaty voice that convinced McPartland she could do exactly that. He knew, too, there was real cause for worry about System Defense. The planets had long been disarmed. Only the Congress of Specialists had power to maintain armed forces.

It had neglected bases and fighting units for years. The Space Patrol alone remained as a weapon for law and safety—and it took all the fighting heart of Marshal Denton to get purchase credits for that! If invaders ever struck—

Jon shuddered, his anger slipping away. "I know, Almira," he murmured, "I know. But why serve me up to the Specialists on a platter? You can psychoanalyze somebody else."

Almira shook her radiant head in dissent. "The Eligibility Committee only certifies candidates for election if they present outstanding work.

"An analysis of you would be outstanding because you're a popular hero, Jon. You've just destroyed a powerful alien ship—been promoted! I'd be certified. Earth would elect me to Congress!"

SHE STOOD before the visa-phone in the Denton home. Jon McPartland visualized her among the Specialists. He could see her slim, perfect figure in abbreviated formal dress, arresting attention like a shaft of warm sunshine in a musty vault. The Specialists would listen to her!

An emotion from below his consciousness pushed the realization aside. He was a man, and this was the woman he loved! "Almira," he said slowly, "I wouldn't mind if it were someone else—but I can't—I won't be just a guinea pig to you!"

The girl came closer to the screen, her eyes alight with eagerness. "Think of what it would mean to the Marshal, Jon—and to the Patrol! You'd be a perfect subject Jon. You're—well, impulsive, and—"

"Before you studied psychology," he flared. "You called me quick-tempered, maladjusted!"

McPartland felt the muscles bunch along his jaw, and drew anger from the memory of a long forgotten quarrel to force back a sick heaviness in his stomach. "Maybe I am all that, Almira—even atavistic, you said then. But I'm more than a specimen in a glass box."

He stopped suddenly. Almira's beautiful face had faded from the visa-phone screen. There had been no cut-off click from her instrument, but she was gone.

"Almira," Jon called sharply, "Almira." There was no answer. His screen remained grey and empty. The connection was broken.

McPartland's blue eyes narrowed, as he shot out a big hand to pick up the intra-ship phone. He jabbed the Radio Room button vigorously.

"Holdern speaking," came the Radio Officer's crisp, efficient voice.

"I was talking to Terra over visa-phone," snapped the Captain. "Did you cut me?"

"No, sir!" came the instant reply, with a shocked intake of breath. "The ether is yours, Captain," Holdern added, recovering his dramatic flair in the next second.

"Then why is my instrument dead?"

"My controls are in order, Sir," said the Radio Officer. "May I send a machinist's mate to look at the instrument?"

"Carry on, Mister," agreed McPartland, smiling suddenly. Best crew in the System, he told himself. His officers acted

fast, without hesitation or alibi. "Report progress to the Control Room."

With a last disgusted frown at the visaphone, McPartland left his cabin and walked through the narrow corridor to the Control Room. As he entered, Lieutenant-Commander Clemens turned from the view screen, his face achieving a masterpiece in worry.

"I was about to inform the Engineer, Sir," said the second-in-command, "The view screen is not functioning properly."

Engineer McTavish looked up from a chess game with Ray Control Officer Reynolds. Neither of the two had much to do in the way of duty, now that the patrol trip was ended. But the Control Room gave them an alert feeling to spice their chess board feud.

At the Lieutenant-Commander's words, McTavish rose with an alacrity that suggested a game not going to his liking. He reached the view screen with McPartland.

Most of the screen seemed normal. The three curved segments, representing joined fields of space extending around the sides and aft of the *Avenger*, showed the normal inky, star-studded black. But it was different with the forward screen. In the center, where the growing image of their green home planet should have been, was only blackness—unrelieved emptiness.

"From the looks of that, Mister McTavish," the Captain said sternly, "you have a few stalemated wires."

**T**HE ENGINEER'S thin face flushed. His long nose twitched, and his grey eyes smouldered with professional indignation. "Begging your pardon, Sir," he objected. "If any coordinates had failed, the entire screen would blank out—and stay blanked, until I was notified. I would authorize partial operation only while the condition was being adjusted, Sir."

"Do you mean," asked Lieutenant-Commander Clemens, his voice dropping ominously, and one arm gesturing heavily at the empty blotch, "that—that—"

"That whatever you see is there," finished McTavish. "Or isn't there," he amended drily.

Captain McPartland saw Ray Control Officer Roberts get up quietly from before the chess board, and walk over to his station. Roberts, his round face impassive,

brown eyes thoughtful, slid into the chair before his microphone, and ran long, slim fingers lovingly over his calculators.

The Engineer, too, at a nod from Jon moved over to his station. His grey eyes were soft with pride as they looked over the exact scale replica of the *Avenger* on the table before him. Within the transparent hull, vari-colored filaments glowed with the pulse of the ship, tracing out the perfect functioning of every mechanism.

McPartland looked at the other, then back at the view screen, and his full lips tightened. He could feel the tenseness of the three officers as he spoke into the intraship.

"Get me Terra Patrol Base on the ship visaphone," he ordered Radio Officer Holdern.

"Sorry, Sir," was the crisp response, "I've been trying to raise Terra since the machinist's mate found your instrument in perfect order. Terra doesn't answer!"

Jon's blue eyes hardened. "Get Mars Patrol Base!" he said softly.

As he moved to the visaphone, Clemens took over the intraship, plugging in his headset. His gloomy expression deepened when the instrument buzzed immediately.

"Navigation reports integrators acting improperly, Sir," he relayed. "Radar shows negative from direction of Terra."

"Impossible!" the Captain gasped, face suddenly wooden.

"Lieutenant Parek's exact comment, Sir," Clemens said sadly. He ran a nervous hand through thinning blond hair beneath his headset. His pale eyes were expectant.

"Tell Navigation to hold course," McPartland said calmly. Something in his voice super-charged the already taut atmosphere of the Control Room, bringing an eager smile to the face of Engineer McTavish.

As though in response, the visaphone hummed, and its screen glowed. The image formed was a young officer, an officer with a wisp of blond mustache and a pale face forced into disciplined blankness by a straining will.

**S**OME of the weariness left the younger man's haunted eyes as he saluted Captain McPartland. He spoke, his lips moving rapidly, but the words were gibberish.

"Radio, scramble for ship code," Lieutenant-Commander Clemens said into the intra-ship. He turned to the Captain. "I hope they have the right code, Sir."

"—extreme emergency, Sir," came the voice of the officer from Mars Base. "Deemed it advisable to use code."

"Very commendable, Mister," McPartland acknowledged, tersely. "My compliments to the Admiral, and may I speak to him at once."

"I'm sorry, Sir," said the other, "the Admiral is at Terra Base with the major fleet units. I am Lieutenant Browne, commanding."

"Commanding!" exploded Jon. "Then the base must be almost empty!"

"There is only a maintenance crew here," admitted the Lieutenant wearily, and added defensively, "It's the same at Jupiter Base, Sir."

"All ranking officers are at Terra Base with the battleships, to receive instruction in the use of new equipment, the Specialists have perfected—You know, Captain, defense against mono-charge rays."

"Yes," groaned McPartland, "I know. The Specialists strip our Bases to make a big ceremony—of the only thing they've done for the Patrol in decades. And now—" He squared his broad shoulders, biting back the rest. "I have an urgent report. Who is ranking officer outside of Terra?"

"You are, Sir. I was about to radio you, when your call came through." Browne saluted again and drew himself up rigidly, as he went on: "

"I beg to report, Captain, that we have lost radio contact with Terra Base. Telescopic observation reveals—" his voice faltered and the lines worked more deeply into his white face—"reveals, Sir, *no trace* of Terra, Luna, or the stars and planets normally visible—throughout a spherical area six-hundred-thousand miles in diameter."

The Lieutenant paused. McPartland said nothing. His square jaw was straining, as though to knot his face into the same hard fist as each of his great hands.

On the face of Engineer McTavish, the eager smile had frozen. Ray Control Officer Reynolds let his restless fingers fall motionless on the table before him. Clemens' small, regular features were swept

blank by an apprehension too intense to be mirrored.

All of them strained to hear Browne's concluding words, in a voice that was suddenly a whisper: "Within that area is an absolute blackness we cannot penetrate by radio, radar, or telescope!"

"Thank you, Mister," the Captain acknowledged, "that checks with our own observation." He was not aware of his own voice, the cold, slow words could have been spoken by some one else. "Have you contacted Jupiter Base?"

"Yes, Sir," Lieutenant Browne answered eagerly, "they too agree."

"Very good," McPartland said. "Stand alert. I will contact you later." His hand reached for the switch.

Alarm leaped into Browne's face. "Captain! Sir! Are there no further orders? Four Patrol ships are on outer patrol—May I suggest—"

McPARTLAND'S full lips curved into a tight, mirthless smile, below the sudden flame in his blue eyes. "Mister, the Fleet is at Terra Base. If it can't—" He let the sentence stop unfinished, and added quietly: "This ship can handle more than those light cruisers."

"I beg your pardon, Sir," Lieutenant Browne murmured. A second later, his image faded from the screen.

From the corner of his eye, Jon saw the others watching the empty screen, as though waiting for the vanished officer to ask the question that was in their minds. Lieutenant-Commander Clemens, however, shook his head mournfully, anticipating his superior's next act, and stepping aside from the intra-ship.

The Captain reached for the instrument, punching down the lever for Navigation. "Lieutenant Parek," he said clearly, "take absolute solar bearings at once—plot a blind course for Terra Base."

He heard McTavish release his breath in a soft satisfied, whistle, even as Parek's monotonous tenor replied: "Bearings taken, Sir. Course plotted, Sir. Ready to proceed."

"Good man! He's ahead of us," exclaimed Engineer McTavish, his gray eyes dancing. "There's a brain behind that sing-song voice, after all! Begging your pardon, Sir," he added to Jon.



McPartland shot the Engineer a quick glance and nodded. The two of them shared their pride in the *Avenger*: McTavish in the ship itself, the Captain in the officers and crew as well. And both of them sensed, with Clemens and Roberts, that the whole, delicate, balanced entity, the *Avenger*, would find battle in the blackness ahead.

The Captain turned back to the intraship. "Proceed on course, Mister," he ordered. "Full speed ahead! Reduce to quarter-speed when we enter the area. Be prepared to operate ship in absolute lack of visibility!"

"Yes, Sir," the Navigation Officer acknowledged, laconically.

"Begging your pardon, Sir," McTavish said fiercely, as his commanding officer turned away from the phone, "absolute lack of visibility. We will have interior lights, Sir—I guarantee it—at least the emergency circuits."

Clemens turned his pale blue, worried eyes of the Engineer. "Light, Mister? Light, if we can see it! There's light in and beyond that—that place ahead, but we can't see it!" he said mournfully.

"Man, there's an interference screen," the Engineer snapped. "Once we're through it, we'll see what's going on." He jerked his lanky frame up from his chair suddenly, his thin nose twitching excitedly, and turned to McPartland. "The screen may play merry havoc with our machinery, Sir. Perhaps we should hit at full speed and let our momentum crash us through."

Ray Control Officer Reynolds answered the other's first assertion. "A spherical interference screen, Mister?" he asked quietly. "Six hundred thousand miles in diameter! We know how much equipment it takes for a protective screen around this ship—and that screen doesn't stop light or radio."

McTavish's grey eyes widened. "Man, that's right! It would be a fantastic job." But he insisted stubbornly: "As long as there's ether in there, we'll have light!"

"I don't believe there's ether in there," Jon interposed thoughtfully. "That's the only answer. Radar waves would be reflected from a screen of any sort—but our beams simply vanish."

Clemens gasped. "Then the fluorescent markings on our controls—we won't see

them!" he said anxiously. "Light travels through ether—"

"Mister McTavish," McPartland interrupted curtly, "get your men and rig up a fixture for Lieutenant Parek. 'He'll have to work by touch—everything must be at his fingertips.'"

"Yes, Sir," the Engineer responded briskly. He glanced respectfully at his commanding officer; McTavish's thin face brightened as he saw the strength of the Captain's reasoning, and found himself with a job he could handle. He started out of the control room.

"There won't be much time, Mister," Jon reminded him.

"Begging your pardon, Sir, we won't need much."

With that, the officer was gone.

Again Jon smiled proudly, and turned to where his Lieutenant-Commander waited. "Mister Clemens, open all switches on the intra-phone, and order all stations switched open to the control room. You will relay any necessary messages between stations."

Clemens clamped on his headset, and his hands went over the switches rapidly. "Attention, all stations. All stations."

"You may inform the men of the situation and our plans," Jon added, quietly.

Ray Control Officer Reynolds caught his gaze, his large brown eyes thoughtful. "May I suggest, Sir, a fixture for the ray guns? I can operate my calculators, and know the results by sound—but the gunners—"

"Disintegrator rays," Jon reminded him, "travel through ether, as does light. So do your range-finder beams."

"Of course, Sir!" Reynolds said, his round face startled and dismayed. He ran his fingers over his keyboards slowly. "That means, Sir, that we—"

"We will be weaponless in there," McPartland finished grimly. "A lifeboat with an old fashioned powder cannon and explosive shells could finish us off." He laughed harshly. "If it could find us!"

THE FORWARD view-screen was entirely blanked out. A line was rapidly moving along the side screens—a line that erased the stars and drew a portent for the men in the control room of the *Avenger*.

Jon McPartland's steady gaze flicked from that line back to the empty forward screen. His blue eyes burned into that emptiness. Somewhere in there was Terra Base—and at Terra Base was Almira Denton!

Whatever the force that had closed silently around the Earth, it had stilled the heart of the solar system. The planets waited, Jon knew, restlessly, breathlessly; for the whole intricate, interworld civilization drew its life from the great industries of Terra. Let those industries stop, or be taken over by enemies, and all the planets would be at the mercy of those enemies.

And the only military power which the Supreme System Congress could call upon was at Terra Base. McPartland imagined the great space battleships—cramped into overhaul cradles—the crews dispersed on leave. Slight chance to get them off in the blackness—even if crews could be assembled—even if they had any place to go!

But the *Avenger* had some place to go! McPartland's ship had a crew—and it could fight!

"We'll fight," Jon told himself savagely. "We'll win! And Almira—if—" He didn't finish even the thought. Instead he visualized the lovely oval of her face—with the green eyes set in like twin, glowing emeralds.

The sudden jarring blast of the forward rockets brought Jon's gaze around to the side screens. They were almost completely blanked out. Only a thin slice of normal space remained. They were entering the area, and Lieutenant Parek was braking.

"Man, that wasn't too soon," McTavish said tensely. Clemens said nothing, his face carefully set in a harried expression he would retain even when invisible. Reynolds looked up dejectedly from his desk, his hand resting protectively on the calculators that would be useless to them. The Captain moved over to the intra-ship, standing close beside his Lieutenant-Commander.

They waited silently. Jon was looking at the Engineer's eager smile, as the retarding rocket blasts died away. McTavish nodded, counting the drumming explosions from the stern and feeling the vibration of the ship with an intimate knowledge.

"We're at quarter speed, Sir," he said, as the Captain heard the Navigation Offi-

cer's clear, even voice over the intra-ship speaker:

"Quarter speed, Sir. On course."

The last two words fell into complete blackness. Jon felt the pupils of his eyes straining, opening for the least trace of light. There was none. He could hear the slow breathing of the others, and a few low exclamations through the open switches of the intra-ship.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," he ordered, and let his breath out of his lungs slowly. "Mister McTavish," he added, "here's something to add to your technical knowledge: electricity does not need ether—whether it travels around or within wires."

"Thank you, Sir," came the Engineer's ironic reply like a sound without origin in the well of blackness that closed in on Jon from every side. "I had reached the same conclusion, Sir."

"We are running on batteries, Sir," Clemens relayed from beside him. "The cyclotron has stopped functioning."

"The batteries will be enough, Sir," came the Engineer's voice. "I arranged an automatic out-in, Sir. I knew electrons couldn't bombard atoms without ether to travel through."

"Good work, Mister!" said McPartland.

"Thank you, Sir."

**T**HE CAPTAIN said nothing more. He was listening to the steady drum of the stern rockets. The explosive charges were fired by electric spark. All the functional mechanism of the ship was operated electrically.

His ship could travel. They would reach Terra. There was nothing to do but wait—wait in an emptiness that brought a man to the edge of insanity.

It was eerie, this feeling of isolation. Only the rocket jets seemed alive, pushing the *Avenger* ahead. Jon put out his hand and felt the phone. It was warm under his fingers. He shivered in the warm air of the control room. Suddenly he had to speak, to reach the others in this Stygian pit.

"It must be bitter cold on Terra," he said evenly, "without sunshine, without heat drawn from the central power beams."

Near him, Clemens sighed heavily. Reynolds' fingers drummed over his keyboard. It was McTavish who answered:

"Aye, Sir," he said, his words edged with rage, "a few days of this and Terra would be a frozen wasteland."

McPartland clenched his great fists harder. "There won't be a few days!" he grated. "Whoever's behind this will want Terra and her industries—and her people—in working order."

"You think it's human beings?" came the Engineer's question. "I hadn't thought—"

"It has to be," Jon reasoned. "The timing is perfect, and so is the strategy. Striking the heart of the Solar System—when the Patrol is there and helpless. They knew."

"Outlaws." Reynolds commented quietly.

"More than that, man!" exploded McTavish. "There's science here. It takes science—genius—to eliminate the ether! It's never been done before!"

"I think you're right, Mister," McPartland said. His words fell with an inflection as soft and deadly as the impenetrable blackness about them. "There's science here—and outlaws, armed desperate men who would dare to try this."

"It's treason. Specialists and outlaws in an unholy alliance, trying for a *coup d'etat*—for power over the whole system! There'll be a demand for surrender."

"A black plot," quipped McTavish. But the others could hear the angry quickening of his breath.

"What choice will the Congress have but surrender?" Clemens asked sadly.

The Captain smashed the flat of his hand against the intra-ship phone before him. "WE have the choice! We are fighters! There can't be many of them in the plot—or it would have leaked out. They need the blackness for protection."

"Your logic is sound, Sir," said the calm voice of the Ray Control Officer. "But how will we reach them—how will we fight them?"

The others couldn't see McPartland's broad shoulders sag momentarily at the question. He thought of Almira Denton somewhere in Terra Base, and bunching muscles snapped his shoulders back.

"We'll find out when we land," he answered slowly.

"That'll be soon, man!" McTavish cried suddenly.

They felt the *Avenger* lurch, and quiver

as port and forward rocket tubes thundered. Jon looked upward to where the view screens hung. Those screens should be splashed with a riot of color as the ship changed course and plunged through the jet wash. But nothing was visible to Jon's straining eyes. He heard the Engineer explaining:

"Parek has a mechanical timer rigged with an alarm, to tell him when to correct course."

McPARTLAND thought for a moment of the officer down below, sitting motionless, his hands strapped into fixtures. The empty seconds would be eternities, while he listened to the monotonous ticking of the timer. Then the strident alarm would shatter his nerves, and his fingers search the guide wires for the right controls.

"Can he do it?" Clemens murmured anxiously, as though reading his commander's thought.

"If he can't, there isn't a Navigator in the System who can," the other said tightly.

All of them could feel the deck sloping. The *Avenger* was heading down. Parek was feeling for Terra Base, balancing the forces of the retarding and propulsion jets, listening to the beat of the timer.

McTavish, too, was feeling for their goal. "Steady, man, steady," he said aloud, his sense attuned to the ship's familiar vibrations. "Landing speed, now," he added.

All of them braced their legs against the increasing tilt of the floor. They rocked on their feet, as Parek poured a richer mixture into the blast tubes.

For a long second the *Avenger* hung balanced on her jets. Every spaceman aboard her felt his heart stop. Then the ship settled. There was a bump. A moment of rocking, and they had landed!

McPartland spoke into the intraship phone: "Attention all stations! All hands remain at their posts until further orders." He turned from the instrument, trying again to find those about him. "Mister McTavish. You will go out with me."

"Mister Clemens, you are in command. Take no action without orders from me—or Marshal Denton himself."

"Very good, Sir," replied the Lieutenant-Commander.

"I am at the door, Sir," said the Engineer.

"Good. Mister Reynolds will close the port behind us. No one is to enter the ship, Mister Clemens, unless accompanied by myself or the Marshal. We don't know what the situation is here, and we can't take chances. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Sir," Clemens answered, his tone anxious. "Mister Reynolds will remain at the port, and open it only as instructed."

The three of them groped down the passage. At the port, McPartland spoke into the blackness: "I've switched on audiophone, Mister Reynolds. You will open the port only to my voice or that of Marshal Denton."

"Yes, Sir," was the answer, the words spoken almost into his ear.

Jon reached out and found the other's arm. The Captain's fingers gripped hard, biting into muscle. "We'll soon have the answer to your question," he said softly. "If the Patrol still holds the Base—"

"Good luck, Sir," replied the Ray Control Officer quietly. "We'll be waiting to follow you—anywhere."

The Captain found his Engineer in the well of pitch about him. There was reassurance in the other's tense, firm shoulder. Together, they went through the port, and heard Reynolds shut it behind them.

A SHARP RATTLE of explosions sounded in the distance, off to their left. "Man!" gasped McTavish, "that sounds like—"

"Like a machine-gun," finished his commander. "An old-fashioned explosive powder weapon. Ray guns are useless, of course, without ether."

"There's fighting," the Engineer cried eagerly. A single louder explosion came from the left. The sound hung in the air, muffled and distorted. "A grenade," McTavish added mechanically. "It was thrown into a building—you can tell by the echoes."

"The repair docks," Jon said. "The walls are thick enough."

"That's where the battleships are," the Engineer said dully, his excitement draining into apprehension. "Who's got them,

and who's attacking? If the plotters have taken the docks and the fleet—"

"The fleet's useless," snapped the Captain, "in this blackness. The plotters can't man it anyway—they'll want to immobilize it, and keep it intact until they've won."

"It's the old arsenal I'm thinking about. We need that for—"

"Hist, man!" warned McTavish, suddenly. "There's someone near us."

"Who goes there?" challenged a voice sharply. "You're surrounded, and you'll get cold steel if you don't surrender."

Jon laughed. "Did you surround the *Avenger*, too, Marshal?" he asked ironically. "We're standing directly beside it."

He heard a sudden feminine sob of relief, and soft words that sent the blood throbbing to his temples: "Oh, Jon—Jon darling."

Another voice cut in brusquely: "This is no time for melodramatics, daughter."

"Jon, I was sure it was you. Who else would try to fly a ship in this? But we couldn't take chances. We had to find out and warn you before you blundered into the enemy!"

"We were on the lookout, Sir," the Captain assured him. He could imagine Marshal Denton; sturdy, tall, handsome. The Marshal's gray eyes would be flashing there in the blackness, and the snow-white hair piled on his massive head would make him look more than ever like a noble old lion.

"What have you to report, Captain?" Denton asked tautly.

Jon told him briefly of their position and actions since he'd first found communications with Terra cut. As he spoke, a soft hand found his. Jon slipped his arm about Almira's slim waist, and drew her close. Her head sank to his shoulder.

He felt her stir with amazement, and her little hands gripped his arms, as he told the Marshal his suspicions of an alliance between outlaws and some of the Specialists.

"It might be," murmured Denton. "There's a small bloc that has consistently opposed requests for credits to enlarge and strengthen the Patrol."

"What's the situation here, Sir?" McPartland asked eagerly. "Has there been an ultimatum—a demand for surrender? Where is the Congress?"

"The Specialists are in session," Marshal

Denton told him. "You can imagine the confusion! They're getting nowhere.

"There's been no demand made yet—though I think you're right and one will come!"

He was silent for a minute. Jon's hands clenched. "What about here at the Base, Sir?"

"When the darkness fell, the repair crews and guards in the docks were attacked immediately by men armed with grenades and firearms," Denton explained. "Most of our personnel there was captured or driven out.

"Fortunately I was here. I armed a squad with firearms from the old arsenal, and attacked. We've got them pinned in the docks. They can't get out—and we can't get in."

"The plotters must have overlooked the arsenal," Jon mused aloud, "or they didn't know about it." He could imagine the tense hurried minutes that Denton described so calmly.

THE MARSHAL had thought and moved rapidly. Squads were needed to lay cables or ropes to mark paths in the blackness. Men were armed and moved up to attack the docks. It was a brilliant mind that had surrounded the attackers and organized communications and supplies for the Patrolmen.

"Congratulations, Sir," McPartland said admiringly, and added soberly, "I imagine there isn't much news from the rest of Terra."

He heard Marshal Denton sigh heavily. "No, Jon. There's some communication over old electric-type instruments. In some places there's rioting. Everywhere, it's cold, and people are frightened and disorganized. There hasn't been time for lack of food to make itself felt."

"Stuff could move over the railroads, Sir," cut in McTavish.

"The Specialists have forbidden that," the Marshal told him. "Because of danger of accidents."

"Accidents!" snapped the Engineer scornfully. "Worrying about accidents at a time like this!"

Jon spoke impatiently. "May I suggest Sir, that you send a body of men to Congress. Surround the building, cut outside communications. When the darkness lifts,

search every Congressman, and arrest any found with firearms. You can bet the plotters will be armed. But the Congress will have to be suspended until every member is thoroughly investigated!"

He felt Almira stiffen in his arms, and heard McTavish exclaim: "Good, man!"

"Suspend the Congress—" Marshal Denton repeated, shocked. "Jon, you—"

"It's an emergency, Sir," McPartland urged. "It's war. You're the supreme military commander. You have the right to act on your own initiative whenever the Congress of Specialists cannot function. They can't function now! You can't let them be stampeded into surrender. There must be no surrender!"

For a long minute, there was silence in the blackness about him. "I'll do it, Jon!" Denton said at last. "Captain Wendall!"

A man answered somewhere beyond him. Denton gave swift orders, and the other moved away. "My men will be at the Congress in five minutes, Jon," the Marshal said. "Now, just how do you propose to fight this thing? We have to be right, now, you know. We must win—or be executed as traitors!"

"I want the *Avenger* loaded with space torpedoes, Sir. We have hundreds in the arsenal," McPartland explained. "I believe the logical place for the ether dissipating machinery would be on the far side of the moon. The outlaws and their Specialist friends could have worked there without fear of discovery."

Denton was already giving orders to another officer. "We'll have your ship loaded in minutes, Captain," he said. "You're right about the moon—we don't even patrol that side. You intend to—"

"To blast every square inch of its surface," Jon said fiercely, "from space. Once we destroy the machinery, and lift the blackness, we'll make short work of the plotters. The *Avenger* could do the job alone!"

"Good!" said the Marshal. "I hope your theory is sound. We haven't much time to experiment."

"No," said Almira suddenly. "Millions of people would die in rioting, accidents, from starvation—if light—if the ether isn't restored! We'd have to surrender before that happened."

"What would those millions gain," Mc-

Partland demanded savagely, "better than death—under the rule of outlaws and traitors?"

ALMIRA pulled away from him. Her fingers slipped from his. "It is modern," she said coolly, "to preserve life, not throw it away in hopeless resistance! If you fail, we must surrender."

"I'm afraid she's right, Jon," Marshal Denton's voice added quietly.

Jon's angry retort stopped on his tongue, as a strong hand clamped his arm. McTavish whispered, somehow finding his Captain's ear: "We'll still have the *Avenger*, Sir, to fight in—let them surrender who will."

McPartland fought back his rage. The Engineer was right. It was no time to debate. It was time to start the fight. "I'll instruct my men, Marshal Denton," he said, "about the space torpedoes. The things haven't been used in battle for decades, and they'll be tricky to handle."

"We've laid a cable line directly to the ship, Sir," an invisible officer beside him said respectfully. "You can follow it with your feet."

"Thank you." Jon made his way back, McTavish at his heels, and gave necessary orders to Reynolds at the port. McTavish went inside to superintend the loading, and Jon followed the cable to the Marshal's office.

It was a long, almost silent wait, while the loading went on. There was little to say. Denton received reports, and issued orders. There was the murmur of detached voices, and the sound of slow, careful footsteps in and out of the room.

Jon sat quietly out of the way. Almira was there somewhere. She did not speak to Jon, although he heard her soft voice in occasional snatches of conversation with her father. Jon could imagine her, pale with the strain of this nightmare, lovely, her green eyes angry and scornful. She was angry, he knew, angry at his will to resist—to waste, as she thought, blood and lives in a fight that would seem vain if the darkness weren't lifted. Almira couldn't know what kind of men the outlaws were. Jon knew; he'd fought them!

Restlessly, he started to rise from the chair. The *Avenger* should be ready. His feet sought for the cable on the floor, and

his eyes found it first. It took a full second to realize that dim light had returned.

Denton exclaimed suddenly. The light was growing brighter. Then it was full daylight, and the Marshal was starting for the door. From outside came the rattle of firearms, and a hissing that told of many heat rays flaring into action. The battle for the repair docks!

"Wait, Sir," McPartland cried to the Marshal, "the visaphone! This must be it. The plotters have let the ether back to broadcast their demands."

The news channel button on the visaphone glowed brightly. Denton snapped the instrument on, and adjusted the wave length. The screen glowed—empty! Whoever was broadcasting was not projecting his image. The voice that spoke was harsh, cruel:

"Citizens of the System," it said bluntly. "The Terra Council for Freedom has struck for your liberation. We are citizens of Earth who rise in indignation against the corruption, hypocrisy, and inefficiency of the Congress of Specialists. Most especially, we rise against the dictatorship of the man who has used the Congress as his tool—the man who today holds your alleged representatives prisoner—Marshal Denton, your ruler, unmasked, at last, in this moment when we strike for your freedom!"

The voice paused. For a space there was no sound from behind that glowing, empty screen.

"DICTATOR!" Marshal Denton belated. His handsome face colored, and he took an involuntary half step toward the visaphone. "Dictator! Of all the—the—" He choked off the rest, regaining his poise.

"Very nice, Jon," murmured Almira. "Your suggestion certainly played into their hands."

"One lie is as good as another," he answered. "You should know that propaganda works on lies." He grinned at them suddenly. "We can guess from that tirade, that we have the leaders—or some of them imprisoned with the Congress."

Almira flushed, and was silent. Denton nodded. "Yes, Jon, I think we have. But how did they communicate with the others."



The Captain shrugged. "Probably telegraph. An instrument could be hidden there, and wires laid well in advance. Listen—"

From the visaphone, the hard voice spoke again: "We, the Terra Council for Freedom demand the immediate surrender of the Congress, and of Marshal Denton. When Denton has informed the Congress of his acceptance, our committee will communicate further instructions."

Another long pause, before the speaker concluded. The words were deadly with menace: "Citizens of Terra, revolt and overthrow your oppressors! Until they surrender, Terra will remain a dark, silent world. If they do not surrender, it will become a dead world soon!"

The screen brightened suddenly. A man's head and shoulders formed. The shoulders were broad, powerful. Above them, the face was strong, bronzed. There was a scar across one cheek that was known throughout the system. Black eyes blazed with reckless courage, out of deep sockets. Full, thick lips curved in a crafty smile.

Jon McPartland clenched his huge fists helplessly. He knew the trail of murder and robbery behind that animal courage, that scheming smile. The man was Mark Baron, the most notorious and deadly outlaw still at large!

"Someday," Jon said savagely, "I'll catch you, Baron!"

The outlaw was fading from the view, as the screen dimmed. Outside, the daylight, too, faded. Blackness crowded in again.

"Very clever," came Almira's voice. "Many people are foolish enough to think of Mark Baron as a modern Robin Hood."

"He's the worst kind of criminal," Marshal Denton said bitterly. "But the ridiculous legends about him will help their propaganda. There will be panic and rioting now!"

"Jon, we can't let this go on! We've got to—"

An officer entered to report. Outside, the firing had dropped off. Ray guns were again useless. There hadn't been time to recapture the docks.

"The *Avenger* is ready, Sir," Jon said, when the officer had left. "We'll take off at once."

"Good luck, Captain," the Marshal said

dully. "Almira, will you go—" He left the question unfinished. Jon knew he was thinking of his daughter, in a world ruled by men like Mark Baron. "Jon!" The older man said fiercely, "we can't give up!"

"I'll stay with you, Father," the girl said quietly, refusing Denton's unspoken plea. "We'll have to be realistic—have to think of the millions whose lives—" Her soft voice caught. "But, Jon—Jon, good luck!"

OUT IN SPACE, the starlight was bright and clean. The four men in the *Avenger's* control room glued their eyes on the side view screens. They felt their spirits lift out of the black nightmare that still covered the forward screen. They were silent, loving the stars and planets shining back at them, untouched by the evil that blotted out Terra.

"It's wonderful, man," said McTavish at Jon's shoulder.

McPartland nodded. He was surprised somehow to find the control room unchanged. Reynolds still sat before his calculators. Clemens stood beside the intraship, headphones clamped over his ears.

The Lieutenant-Commander shuddered with every lurch of the ship. "Those torpedoes, Sir," he muttered anxiously. "One would blow this ship apart."

"Don't worry, Mister," the Engineer reassured him, "we'll get rid of half of them on the moon." He added to McPartland: "We're launching them from Ray Station Six."

"Good! You'd better get down there, Mister McTavish. We'll be heading in for the moon—but quick!"

"Yes, Sir." The Engineer left the control room.

As he passed through the door, McPartland heard the even voice of Lieutenant Parek on the intraship: "Course plotted, Sir. Ready to proceed."

"Proceed," the Captain ordered. "Full speed ahead."

"Full speed?" groaned Clemens, as the ship swung, and they felt the pull of acceleration. "The vibration, Sir! Those torpedoes."

Jon grinned. "You know you don't give a hang about those torpedoes, Mister Clemens—just so we land them where they'll do the job."

The Lieutenant-Commander looked pained. "Of course, Sir," he agreed quickly, and added with an effort: "But full speed with no visibility!" He started as an excited voice rang in his headset, and automatically relayed the message McPartland could hear clearly through the still open switches of the intraship: "Radio reports Mars Base has observed us, and is asking for orders."

"No orders," Jon snapped. "They can't help."

"Lieutenant Browne's compliments, Sir," responded Radio Officer Holdern eloquently, "and good luck."

His words were followed by low exclamations from stations all over the ship. The *Avenger* was again enveloped in the pitchy nightmare. Jon put his hand on the ship phone, aware that Reynold's fingers once more were drumming his calculator keys, and Clemens was breathing quickly, lightly, in time to the quickened beat of the rocket jets.

There wasn't long to wait this time. The Navigation Officer's unhurried, emotionless words floated into the Control room: "Ready for run, Sir."

McTavish was cut in on a three way connection. "Ready to fire torpedoes, Sir," he said immediately.

"Fire at positions," Jon told him.

He felt the sweep of the ship as she turned, and imagined Parek, waiting quietly for his alarm.

"Position one," warned the Navigation Officer, paused, and added flatly, "dead."

"Torpedo away," sang the Engineer from Ray Station 6. "Ready again."

"Position two," Parek responded as his alarm spoke again. "Dead."

"Away," McTavish told him jubilantly. "Ready."

**T**HE PROCEDURE was repeated over and over. Below them, on the cold dead surface of the moon, carefully plotted explosions cut a swath of destruction that could destroy any man-made structure ever raised. Space torpedoes were slow, easy to dodge or hit with a ray beam. They had been abandoned in modern combat. But they were the most powerful explosive force ever created by human science.

In the control room there was nothing to hint at success, or failure. But Mc-

Partland knew the torpedoes couldn't be seen or destroyed with ray beams in this etherless black. Nothing could halt the methodical blasting. Jon grinned. The super-science of the plotters made it possible to use an obsolete weapon against them.

"What if some miss the edge?" asked Clemens anxiously. The *Avenger* was running around the circumference of the satellite, following a course that drew ever-tighter circles until the last torpedo was delivered in the exact center.

"The fuse is set to explode them before they reach the Earth," McPartland told him. "But none will miss."

There was silence then in the room, except for the unending duet of Parek and McTavish, coming sharp and clear through the ship phone. The three officers braced their legs hard against the deck, as the ship raced at maximum speed into sharper turns.

In the end, the *Avenger* seemed to whip around almost in its own length. Jon balanced himself with effort, his stomach rising within him. He was giddy and nauseated. His eyes strained for something to focus on, to give him perspective. There was nothing. He was still blind.

**"WE BLASTED** every foot on that side of the moon," McPartland said bitterly, "but we didn't get the machinery."

"No, man," agreed McTavish who had come up to the control room again. "That cursed devil's mantle is still there!"

The Captain's blue eyes burned into the forward screen. "They're waiting on Terra Base, too," he grated. "But we'd see the break first. The light would come back at the edges, and—" he stumbled over the implication of the next words, "work-in-toward-the-center!"

McTavish's grey eyes blazed suddenly. "In toward the center, man! Right! But the moon isn't at the center!"

Jon was already shouting into the phone: "Observation Officer. Locate the exact center of that area, in relation to this ship, Terra, and Luna."

"Navigation! Get bearings from Observation, and plot torpedo course for dead center."

"This will do it, Sir," shouted the Engineer. "I should have thought of it, Sir, Begging your pardon."

"It may be well protected, Sir," Clemens suggested.

Clemens quietly relayed the report from Observation: "Impossible to locate exact center, Sir. Whole area is shifting constantly, unpredictably." He shot a look of glum satisfaction at McTavish, and added: "The approximate center is on the far side of Terra and Luna, Sir."

"A space ship," McPartland said savagely, "flying an erratic course. We don't have much chance finding it with a torpedo."

"The torpedoes can be adjusted for magnetic, Sir," said the Engineer.

McPartland smiled. "If the torpedoes were floating free in space and we can adjust them to do that—the field would attract them to any ship within a Spacial Unit.

"Mister McTavish, I want to sow a hundred of them as magnetic space mines in the approximate center of your devil's mantle."

McTAVISH released his torpedoes into the blackness. One by one they blasted off. The three in the control room watched their fiery jets disappear into the emptiness of the forward screen.

"They'll go dead and float," McPartland told Clemens, "and explode on contact." He clenched his big hands, and laughed harshly. "If we could only see it!"

"How long, Sir?" Reynolds asked quietly. "Will it be soon enough?"

"It's got to be soon enough," the Captain snapped.

"If Marshal Denton surrenders, Sir," Clemens pointed out, "and the light is restored, the outlaws would see the mines. They could—"

The Engineer's voice rang in his headset, and he winced. The others heard McTavish's words over the phone: "The light! The light, man! They hit one of the torpedoes!"

"We hope—" Clemens said.

Jon's glance swept to the forward screen. Starlight was sucking into the edges of the blackness. He watched that hated black-

ness shrink—shrink, until Terra floated blue and beautiful on the view screen.

"Terra," Jon whispered, half to himself, "Whose Terra?"

The Lieutenant-Commander winced again as another voice rang in his ears, and he relayed without an attempt at pessimism: "Observation reports wreckage of ship, Sir, and presence of ninety-eight floating mines."

McPartland spoke into the phone himself: "Navigation. Course for Terra Base. Pass through mined area. Mister Reynolds would like a little practice—destroying the extra mines."

Reynolds, a grateful smile on his round face, ran his finger lovingly over the calculators, and spoke into his mike: "All ray stations. Fire on command only." The calculators clicked. "Station Six, range—"

ALMIRA DENTON looked up at Captain Jon McPartland with eyes that were the soft hue of Terra itself.

"Almira," he said, "about that—that case report."

She smiled, and the curve of her soft lips was as it had been in his mind since he left on patrol "Jon darling," she laughed. "We can forget that. When the Congress gets through ferreting out its traitors, and hearing your report, father won't need my help with them."

"But I want you to analyze me," he insisted.

"I mean to, Jon," she agreed gently. "But only for my own information."

"And mine, too, darling," he said. "I want you to analyze a dream," McPartland said firmly. "I keep seeing a little asteroid—one I explored when I had a one-man Patrol scout, way back. I keep seeing it with an atmosphere unit installed, and a Terra-gravity unit. There's a house, and a beautiful woman with red-gold hair and gorgeous eyes, and a little boy named Patrick, and a little girl named Kathleen."

He paused, watching her eyes as the puzzlement was replaced by understanding. "What do you suppose the dream means?" he asked.

"Tell me more about it, Jon," Almira asked softly.



Illustration by DOOLIN

# The Bubble Dwellers

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

**The hell-planet of Vulcan had spawned a deadly menace that might entrap the civilized worlds. Only Sydney Hallmeyer could halt that force, only he could stop the fiendish Zondat—and he was the slave of the man he fought.**

**T**O LOOK AT US, you would have thought we didn't have a care in the world. You would have thought everything was on the up and up. To look at us, you would have thought we were relaxing after a good meal. Will Carrist was holding a cup of steaming hot coffee to his lips with one hand, the other just

lightly grabbing the edge of the galley table to fasten him tight against the slight axial twist of our Hamson-Dupré, Wittenberg-powered, thirteen-jet, new model spaceship; I, Sidney Hallmeyer, spreading myself all over the bolted-down metal chair opposite him, smoking a cigarette slowly, and admiring the perfect smoke rings I was

blowing, and playing the part of the iron-nerved hero.

Those were my thoughts, as our brand-new spaceship bowled happily along through deep space, doing exactly as she pleased, because there wasn't a soul at her controls.

"To look at us," I told Will, blowing one smoke-ring right through the center of another, "you'd think we were the gayest couple of morons this side of Sagittarius."

"To look at us," Will agreed froggily, setting his coffee cup into the pool of coffee in the bottom of his saucer, "you wouldn't



think we were falling into the Sun."

I had to admire Will, then—maybe because when you're certain of death, you don't see why you shouldn't take time out to get sentimental. Will was my best friend, and one of the three best space-pilots in the Solar System. He was chunky-jawed, thick through the chest, and as broad of shoulder as the length of one of his short, powerful arms. He was excitable, easy to panic, his wide-set eyes habitually set in a mournful, worried expression. Nerves, that was it. Nerves, which probably made him the pilot he was—able to sense the gravitation of an approaching planet within a fractional margin of error; almost able to give a meteor-detector good competition. But now, nerves did not bother Will. He had schooled himself against it. He had fought the horror we were falling into, and now he faced it; knew it for what it was: extinction. His stubby fingers held the coffee cup so that there was not a quiver on the liquid surface, though the wrecked ship rocked gently back and forth on its beam. His nerves were as perfectly under control as those perfect smoke rings I was blowing. Good old Will, I thought sentimentally, after another couple of hours of this falling toward the Sun, we'll shake hands for the last time, and then we'll open the Grimson heat-shields. . . .

The newly invented Grimson heat-shields started it off, of course. Because I had an E.E., because the Tellurian Research Institution had somehow come to think of me, fondly, as its ace trouble-shooter, I was elected for the dirty work of setting up the first Planetary Magnetic Field Research Station on Mercury.

"Too bad, Sid," my superior grinned, enjoying my temper, which sometimes played around like a Solar eruption whenever I was dragged away from the easy work in my lab. "In spite of the fact we've been space-traveling for upwards of a century, we still don't know too much about planetary magnetic fields. We know they're intimately bound up and influenced by the Sun, though, so why not study the magnetic field of a planet that's as close to the Sun as any we know of? Mercury."

"But nobody's ever landed on Mercury!" I exploded.

He wagged a finger. "Now, Sid. We

know of two exploration parties that landed. Half of them died from actinic ray burns, of course, but you won't. Your ship is equipped with Grimsons, the new heat-shields. You'll be back inside of a month, none the worse, with the station ready to be taken over by the regular personnel. And chances are," he grinned, having his little joke, "you'll be able to strike up an affair with Edith Dupré. Maybe she really didn't fall into the Sun."

He shuffled papers on his desk.

"Good luck, Sid."

THAT WAS WHAT they named our ship, the *Good Luck*, and they painted a fistful of four-leaf clovers on her nose. But names don't mean anything. And being one of the three best pilots in the Solar System sometimes doesn't mean anything either. The deck was stacked against Will Carrist. The facts are that three meteoroids and our ship, all coming from different directions, coincided in nearly the same volume of space.

Will slid around the first meteoroid in good shape. He was traveling on a good set of strained nerves when he lifted our tail and let the second continue to its destiny. But he was just another article like books, dishes, magnetic equipment and me, flying and crashing around inside the ship when the third meteoroid crashed into our aft section.

We came out of it soon enough, fighting mad. The whole power system was okay. But the gas-orifices leading to the jets were welded shut. Furthermore, the tel-audio had one-sixteenth normal efficiency. We sent weak SOS signals toward Venus, ninety million miles away, knowing Venus would never pick them up. We tested the auxiliary rockets, found them good enough to carry us a million miles only, not the thirty million miles to Mercury. We resolved to save the auxiliary rockets in case we happened to see a meteoroid or other body big enough to carry us around the Sun with it. We fussed around for hours, while the Sun grew bigger, hoping and praying.

Came the time when we put the Grimsons up to tenth-power, their highest degree of protection.

When the heat from the Sun, now nine million miles distant, began to leak through



the Grimsons, we knew we were through.

Carrist cooked a big meal and we ate the last dinner of the damned. We drank coffee and we smoked. We would die like gentlemen. When the heat became uncomfortable, we would cut out the shields, and we would roast where we stood—in a second.

I was afraid to sweat, but I did. I felt soggy. I could hardly breathe. I was uncomfortable. Okay—

"Now, Sid?" said Will, looking at me woodenly.

I shook his hand, we met each other's eyes for a brief moment, then he went slogging up the passageway abaft toward the control cubby. I watched him go—I, Sidney Halmeier, the iron-nerved hero. I broke, and I clattered to my feet, hurling myself up the passageway after him, and I was breathing hard, panting with the terror of negation.

"No, Will!" I yelled, stopping his hand just as he was about to pull on the Grimson shoe-lace plunger.

A mournful, lost expression came to Will's face. He began to shake. "Just when I was beginning to—" he muttered.

And at that moment—reprieve on the eve of execution!—our telaudio burred, cleared its throat of solar static. We had left the receiver open, on the wildly improbable chance that Venus might hear us.

And a clear voice said, though our ears hardly believed:

*"This is Edith Dupré, repeating tenth message requesting help. . . ."*

ANY STEEL SUPPORTS we may have built around our nerves melted like butter. Carrist and I entirely forgot human dignity. We dived for the receiver, scratching and clawing over it, and succeeding only in turning it off. We cursed ourselves hoarse before that voice came in again, but this time, there was no clarity. That voice was twisted and distorted and shaken around by the mad magnetic and gravitational strains that stormed through space proximate to the Sun. We refused to breathe, so long as a breath would cut out the faintest static-rotten whisper:

*"... Planet . . . seven million miles minor axis, thirteen million min . . . Vulc . . ."*

6—Planet Stories—Fall.

*Dr. Robert. . . . The people here are being. . . .*" There was a maddening wash of static. *"Vulcan . . ."* More static. Then, *"... is Ed . . . repeating tenth message . . . help . . . warning you of telepathic impulse. . . ."*

There was nothing more. For a trembling half hour we groveled before that receiver and at last I looked up at Will, my face haggard.

"There's a chance, Will," I croaked. "That couldn't have come from Mercury. We couldn't pick up a message from that far. But we could pick up a message from a planet that's only a million or so miles away. From a planet named—*Vulcan!*"

"Vulcan!" Will looked at me as if I were crazy. "But there isn't any planet by that—"

"No?" I grinned at him in cockeyed fashion. "She named it. Edith Dupré named it. Edith Dupré, flaxen-haired heiress to the Dupré millions, the sleekest, boldest slip of a girl who ever poured her reputation down the drain because she hated conventions and wanted to wear the cover-alls of a space-pilot. She didn't fall into the Sun, Will—and that means we aren't going to either!"

And we didn't! While Will busied himself with the photo-amplifiers, thoughts of Edith Dupré dreamed in my mind. She was tough and rough, and she could use the language of a man with the same blunt honesty that she could use a Hampton gun. She was known the length and breadth of the system, this girl! She was the only woman pilot entered in the *Nine Planet Spaceship Race*, and she was leading all competitors by a few million miles when she was reported missing, ship and all. Her last message, picked up on Venus, was abruptly cut off as she reported that she was going to try to maneuver her ship through a swarm of Sun-bound meteoroids. Everybody knew what had happened. Her ship was wrecked, and she was carried along with the meteor swarm, into the Sun!

That was six months ago—and now it was certain to us that Edith Dupré, daughter of the millionaire spaceship manufacturer, was alive—alive, but in some kind of terrible danger on the mythical planet Vulcan!

Vulcan was not mythical though. Will

and I yelled ourselves hoarse as we saw that celestial body, ebony black against the scalding white face of an intolerable Sun—saw it puffing up toward us as Will used our precious auxiliary rockets. We were sodden rags of sweat before we got into the conical shadow of that tiny planet, and the Sun was eclipsed. We looked through the Sun-filter of the photo-amplifier's eyepiece and we wondered what strange secrets that dark world, fringed with the Sun's fire, would hold for us.

Soon enough, we discovered that Vulcan had an atmosphere—for space around crackled with spiraling flares of flame. The *Good Luck* was plunging downward through Vulcan's ionosphere, and it was an ionosphere such as no space-man had ever passed through before. Titanic sheets of lurid radiance were waved in front of the ship—then withdrawn, as if the ship were a bull tantalized to rage by the actions of a flag-taunting toreador. Streamers of magnetic ions blanketed the ship with columns of static electricity four and five feet high. We seemed to be tossed and rolled in a fury of thundering heavens, but in reality Will's hand on the U-bar was sure, steady, and it was the universe about us that seemed to misbehave. The *Good Luck* was boring down through the upper layers of the atmosphere, and suddenly, the ionosphere was gone.



Zondat

Turbulent air-currents tortured the air around us, but land was rushing upward. Will's lips thinned, and suddenly he jerked the U-bar. The nose of the ship raised, the ship poised. It fell about a foot, rocked back and forth and was quiet.

I sank weakly into a chair, looked up at Will's taut face. We had landed, on an unknown planet. We were safe! Incredible fact, when just a few hours ago, we had given ourselves up to death in the Sun. . . .

"A LOT of nerve that Dupré woman has asking us for help," Will Carrist grumbled sourly as we stood looking at the meteorite deeply imbedded in the aft armor plates of the *Good Luck*. "How are we going to get that hunk of rock out of there?"

We were back to normal—already! Will was as nervous and jiggly as the amazing polar lights which made the bowl of the sky above us into one big fiery, flickering lantern. On the rocky plain about us, points of fire grew and vanished. The metal parts of our clothing snapped with static electricity. The horizons were a ring of up-shooting arcs and streamers of white-hot flame, as if Vulcan were floating insecurely in a kettle of molten steel. Talk about your magnetic planets! Mercury was out of the picture.

"We'll get that hunk of rock out, all right," I promised Will, ill-humoredly. I knew we were both on edge. I knew we couldn't help ourselves. Magnetic currents were interfering with the nerve-impulses of our own bodies—nerve-impulses which in themselves were magnetic currents. "And," I added flatly, "when we leave this planet, we'll be taking Edith Dupré along with us."

"Ah, spacemen," a shrill, rat-a-tat-tatting voice suddenly spoke from behind us, "I trust you will give me leave to say something about that?"

Carrist and I turned so fast we must have momentarily imitated a rotating magnetic pole, for sparks of static electricity danced spiral fashion around us.

Carrist gasped, gave out a choking sound. I turned rigid, my heart stopping, the extremities of my body robbed of warming blood.

"Dr. Roberto Zondat," I whispered. That quickly I knew his identity.

"You are right," said the shrill voice of the man facing us. "I am Dr. Roberto Zondat. Who are you? By what right do you come here? What do you mean by saying you will take Edith away? It is impossible. Disillusion yourself. Space-men, now you must remain on this planet!"

Dr. Roberto Zondat. A thing of bone and fleshless sinew, with a great blade of a nose and glittering flat eyes; small mouth, and a pointed tongue which nervously wet his lips, touching now and then at the blond mustache penciled under his nose. He stood holding a weapon which was not a Hampton. I recognized it as one of the new, small triple-strength nerve-polarizers. He held this gun pointed directly between us. His scraggly head was turned away from us so that he looked at us sidewise, as if one eye might be weaker than the other. There was in his attitude the deadly, humorless passion of a viper.

He was not alone. Pyramided out behind him were seven human beings, dressed loosely in the beggarly type of clothing a space-rat might wear. They too were fidgety, picking at their fingernails, biting their lips, hunching their shoulders, shifting from one foot to the other, their ratty, impatient eyes fixed on us glassily. And behind them were other—beings. Yes, I knew they must be the inhabitants of Vulcan. They had the humanoid figure, but the shortest of them was nine feet tall. Of course. This planet had a low gravity, and the general rule was that growth of living things was in inverse proportion to gravity.

I don't know why, but where I instinctively hated Zondat and the human beings with him, I felt a voiceless compassion for the Vulcanites. They stood like beasts, with dull eyes and stupid faces, arms hanging like strings at their sides. Their loin cloths, the only clothing on their great bodies, flapped in the warm, fitful winds that blew on this Sunless side of Vulcan. They were slaves, I knew, slaves to this stringy nerve-wracked man who held a deadly weapon on us.

It took me a second to make that survey, a second to get my breath back.

I said, meeting Zondat's glassy stare,

"Sorry. We don't intend to remain on this planet."

ZONDAT'S strained, deadly expression did not disappear. He continued to look at me. A strange new glitter grew in his eyes. He hopped bird-like from one foot to another.

"Men," his voice crackled. "These men are our deadly enemies. They have come to get Edith. That won't do. Not at all. We must foil them. They are ours, however. We shall doubtless convert them. Raid their ship. Take all items of clothing, all food. You may now enter the ship."

"Oh, no you don't," I roared, and I knew Will had sprung into life beside me. We threw ourselves at Zondat. Useless! Zondat stepped back, pressed the button on the nerve-polarizer twice—once for me, once for Will. Once was enough. That was that. Something warm and softening relaxed the nerves of my brain to uselessness. I slumped, rolled over, and dreamed. . . .

Will awakened me, blasting my name in my ear, then rolling me over and whimpering. I opened my eyes. He looked like a firecracker with a dozen fuses burning. When I got shakily to my feet, he stood there shaking and wringing his hands.

"Sid," he whimpered, "they took our food. They took every stitch of clothing. They took our guns. That crazy Dr. Zondat, whoever he is! We'll starve. Where did he come from anyway? It's—it's impossible. This is all flat land!"

I reeled around in circles for a moment, holding onto my thudding, sick head. I leaned against the ship. It was true. This was flat, misshapen land, a little rocky, with a few misshapen little plants growing haphazardly. Zondat had appeared from nowhere, from thin air. Where *had* he come from? He had come up behind us, suddenly.

My whirling head couldn't handle the problem. But I did know a lot about Dr. Roberto Zondat. I said to Will with an effort, "Get hold of yourself."

I reeled toward the ship's open hatch, leaned there a minute. "This is a mad-house planet, Will. The evidence is all around us. Science has proved that nerve

impulses are for the most part magnetic currents, as differentiated from magnetic fields. This planet Vulcan is so close to the Sun that the Sun's own magnetic field encloses it. Two magnetic fields operating at the same time. Strong magnetic currents are generated—magnetic currents which have a strong tendency to neutralize the magnetic currents of the body. If you don't fight it, you turn into a nervous wreck. Remember how nervous Zondat and his men were? Vulcan is their hide-out. Zondat's being sprayed with his own poison."

Will gritted, "What d'you mean, his hide-out? Who is he?"

"Later," I said huskily. I entered the ship. Food gone, extra clothing, most of our tools. But the magnetic research instruments were in the main undamaged. That was a relief. I sat down, talked a plan of action over with Will.

So it was that we lifted the ship on her auxiliary rockets once more, and floated gently a few hundred feet above the tumbled plains of vegetation which bordered the flat, desert land.

"**I** GOT a hunch," Will said miserably, "that this is just exactly what Zondat wants us to do, Sid."

I hadn't thought of that. It turned me cold. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? He takes all our tools and our food and our weapons. We can't kill any game, so we have to go where the inhabitants of this planet live so we can eat. We can't fix the ship without all our tools—"

"We've got an oxy-torch and a couple of hammers they forget," I said sharply.

"They aren't enough. Zondat figures we'll find some of these giants that live here and get them to help us lever that meteorite out of the hull. And after that—and after that, Sid, I got a hunch that Zondat knows what we'll do next! You remember Edith Dupré message—she warned us about a telepathic impulse? Well," and Will turned his head away from the view-plate to look at me triumphantly, "Well, I think that right now *we're acting on a telepathic impulse of Zondat's!*"

I sank to a seat, shaking, a curse whispering from my lips. It was incredible—

ble—incredible that Will should come to such a conclusion when he admittedly didn't know anything about Zondat's history—Zondat the magician; the hypnotist; the mental healer; the spiritualist; the fortune teller; the revivalist; the great religious leader—

"The spiritual racketeer!" I finished savagely, out loud. "Lord, Will, it tallies. On Earth, Zondat for ten years was one of the slipperiest religious leaders the Intelligence men ever tried to snare. He had the ability to hypnotize whole masses of religious-minded people, fleece them of hard-earned money. He was psychic, all right—and he did have mental powers which few men before him possessed. He slipped up at last when a dozen of the richest men on Earth willed big sums of their money to him, and then committed suicide. He had them under a hypnosis so strong their minds weren't their own. The Intelligence men closed in on him with so much evidence that he knew he was done for. He made a break for it, fled to open space, and since then—well, this is the first sign anybody's had that he's still alive."

My forehead was cold. I looked at Will and I knew he knew what I was thinking. We were remembering how Zondat's flat, viperish eyes glistened as they probed our very brain. Were we hypnotized? Had his amazing mental powers taken control of our minds—and was he, even now, controlling us with a telepathic impulse?

"Will," I said shakily, "we have to think clearly. We might *not* be hypnotized. We might just imagine we're hypnotized."

Will's voice was dull, hopeless. "And I guess that's what Zondat would want us to think, isn't it, Sid?"

Something broke loose in me. I swore. I roared at the top of my voice.

"No," I shouted, pounding my fist on the console beneath Will's nose. "I'm *me*. I'm Sidney Hallmeyer. I haven't got any part of that snake Zondat in me—and by the lord, from now on, I'll operate on that belief. Will, we're going on. We'll get our ship fixed up the way we planned. And we're still going to leave this planet with Edith Dupré! That's me talking, and not Zondat—understand?"

Will seemed to shrink. He hardly dared

to look at me. He kept the ship on its course, but I could see the nerves in his face plucking like fingers of doubt. I knew what he was thinking. We could rant and rave and swear it was we that were doing what *we* wanted to . . . but all the while it would be Zondat.

I threw up my arms as the conflicting thoughts wrestled in my brain; I plunged aft and threw myself on my bunk, my every muscle rigid as I wrestled with a nightmarish, intangible monster. And it was only an hour later, when I felt the *Good Luck* bump to a gentle landing, that my grim thoughts abated. I sat up straight and looked at myself in the mirror opposite—looked myself straight in the eye—and said, plainly, out loud, "I—Sidney Hallmeyer—I am—I!"

## II

I WORKED OPEN the dogs on the after port and Will and I dropped to the grounds of the village. We each held a Hampton we had found. But we sensed keenly that these giant people who stood in a respectful semi-circle some distance

from the ship, would offer us no harm. Nor did they. The *Good Luck* was sitting evenly, keel down, off to the left of a well-trampled path which corresponded to Main Street in this little nomadic village.

This was an alien world in which we found ourselves, so alien that we knew we would never absorb a tenth of its wonder into our systems. Vulcan, of course, does not rotate. One side eternally faces the Sun, and that side is—molten. The opposite side is continually washed with heavy gales of warm wind, convection currents. Clouds at times blot out the shifting, shunting, dancing auroras which ripple in patterns across a sky so brilliant that it outshines the stars. There is a profusion of vegetation, mushroom in formation for the most part; but there are vegetation and trees which depend on the manufacture of chlorophyll for life. The clouds reflect sunlight from the horizons, which are an eternal ragged terror of sky-shooting flames.

The horizons were the Hades of the Baimers, the Never-Never land, the Terrible Ring of Fire. Plain hell, in other words.



Our life with the Baimers began easily that day, and continued easily. As if understanding what was required of him, a ten-foot Baimer—we did not yet know what they called themselves—approached us, holding his hands aloft in what I must cornily admit is the universal gesture of peace. And this fellow, face, hair and body the general complexion of the mushroom-like vegetation which formed the staple diet, smiled gravely down upon us. There was nothing of stupidity about him, not like those other Baimers who had been with Dr. Roberto Zondat. His eyes caught the polar lights and hell-on-the-horizon and they sparkled with intelligence.

We smiled back, albeit the grins were somewhat forced, as our nerves were playing hob with us all along the line. Those magnetic currents.

Laughter, heavy and thunderous, rippled mutedly up and down the line of Baimer men, women, and children—maybe sixty or seventy of them.

Then the giant leader spoke. We understood nothing. We spoke back. He understood nothing. So they brought us food—in fact, they brought everybody food. Then and there the men and the women pitched in. Roaring fires were built, metal pots were dragged from the staunch tree-bark tents, children as tall as we were ran around screaming and laughing, and first thing you know the odors of good cooking assailed our nostrils.

Three of the adults brought a folding table from one of the larger bark tents—a table which had sixty, foot-high legs. They unrolled the table the way you flap out a sheet, and it was made out of a smooth bark, and it was big enough to seat the whole village. In no time we were eating—gorging is a better word. Viands were pressed in on us, mushroom sandwiches smothered with leaves as sweet and full-bodied as the kernel of a nut. Fruits came, and a doughy substance which was more mushroom. Then some mushroom, fruit, and more mushroom served like soup and with it a whole roll of *kamma*-biscuit was passed around the table. You unwound it and tore off a piece. Laughter ascended.

Three heavy female Baimers now rose and commenced to dance as three male Baimers with solemn faces sat before a great stringed instrument and each took over two or three strings. They counterpointed. The music was thunderous and ponderous, like the Baimers. It was slow, with frequent pauses, and sometimes there were great rumblings that Carrist and I knew we couldn't even hear, but only feel, because they descended below the limit of human audition. Slow it was, but—exciting! We were held immobilized and our pulses, beating faster than the music, seemed to accent each beat. The dancers danced, slowly. It was grotesque dancing, as grotesque as the Javanese, or the Ganymedan *sengua*. I forgot Edith Dupré, Zondat, Earth—everything, in the wonder of these people. These, then, were the inhabitants of Vulcan. We were the center of attention, the lavished-up, the visitors, the honored, and all this was for us. So they hadn't met Zondat yet. . . .

**I**T ENDED. We breathed again, Carrist and I. Then we applauded. By the Lord, we clapped our hands, forgetting for a minute. Well, those Baimers were puzzled, but in their childlike delight in all things impulsive, they clapped too. I guess those musicians and dancers brought down the house that night as they never had. The Vulcanites pounded their hands together wildly, laughing and milling around us.

Their chief brought an end to it. He rose, spoke loudly, commandingly. At once everything was bustle. Left-overs were gathered up, utensils were carted away to a stream at the edge of camp, the table was folded up, and in no time everybody made a bee-line for his bark-tent, and that left Will and me sitting around a fire, and on the other side of the fire three ten-foot Baimers. The banquet was over. Now curiosities would be satisfied, ceremonies adhered to, which suited us. Or at least me.

The three Baimers sat down facing us, their crossed knees almost touching ours. The Baimer to the left of the chief, smiled at us with his friendly albino eyes. He took a long transparent jar from under his loin-cloth. It had strings on it that looked like waxed strings. Then he



whipped out a razor-edged knife.

That came so suddenly that Will howled and tried to make a break for it. I grabbed him.

"Sit quiet," I snapped. "If there's going to be an operation of some sort, you can bank on it these people know what they're doing. It's apparent they want to communicate with us. Maybe this is the first step. Besides, I'll take the operation first."

"And I," avowed Will shakily, "won't take the second! Sid, we have to get away. I don't care if they do feed us, we're getting mixed up with these people, and first thing you know you'll want to help them out of some tight spot, and that means we'll be in the same tight spot—"

He subsided grumpily when I snapped at him again, but the remembrance of what he had said about a telepathic impulse shivered my spine. Maybe—maybe all this was part of what *Zondat* wanted us to do.

The Baimers waited politely and when we finished, he made motions with the knife, and at the same time spoke pleasantly. He gestured to his wrist, made a slicing motion with his knife. He reached into his jar and extracted one of the string-like things and pretended as if the string-like thing were being placed deep in his wrist.

Then he reached for my wrist.

It was a queasy moment. I was terrified of the knife, but I *did* trust them, and I had an idea what the Baimer's gestures meant. He wanted to transplant a nerve from a Baimer into my wrist. So I held my wrist out. I closed my eyes. I felt something smeared on the underside of my wrist, something cold and camphorish. My wrist simply lost sensation.

It didn't take long. I dared to look, but most of the process was being lost to me because the Baimer's big hand was wound about my forearm, cutting off sight of what the knife was doing. Will was bug-eyed, his face pallid. At last the knife was withdrawn. Another substance was smeared over the wound and I was allowed to have my wrist back. There still wasn't any sensation in it, but through the hardened, transparent substance which served as a bandage, I supposed, I saw a thin red line about five inches long. Apparently the operation had been painless,

was now complete. But what was its effect?

The Baimer now motioned with the knife to Will, smiling. Will broke into voluble, but plainly spoken, protests. The Baimer withdrew, and then all three turned their attention to me, the planes and hollows of their big broad faces thrown into shadowy relief by the bright flames of the fire. The chief, he who had first greeted me, now spoke.

And I almost understood him! It was as if his ponderous voice had gaps in it, and through those gaps ran precisely pronounced English words—or they could have been the words of the Universal Tongue, which I also knew. The part I couldn't understand was just—*garble*.

I blew up with excitement. "No! I can't quite understand you, chief—but—but it's marvelous, what I do understand. You said—"

"Yes," answered the big Vulcanite pleasantly. "It is garble garble garble. But in a few seconds the nerve will garble garble and you will find that you can under garble garble garble I assure you."

"You understand me, too?" I demanded.

"Garble," he answered, smiling excitedly, and looking at his two companions. "You see, we have not entirely lost garble science, for once we were a great race. Nerve transplanting in ages long garble garble and the Baimers were once of many languages before garble became so few. Then we learned that magnetic currents garble through and through the atmosphere, and that, since evolution has equipped us with nerves strong enough to withstand the counter-currents of our planet, they are also sensitive enough to transmit telepathic currents, which are generated by the nerves of the brain, much as other nerves generate magnetic current. The transplanting of the nerve—" His own language intervened for a few seconds—just plain garbling. But I knew what he was trying to tell me. Naturally! That was a Baimer nerve in my wrist. It forged a telepathic link between the Baimers and me. That nerve, taken from a Baimer brain, acted as a telepathic channel leading Baimer thoughts to my brain. The language they spoke came out as my language.

I gathered too that this was one of the

few medical secrets which had been salvaged from a glorious civilization that was now dead, far in past history. At one time the Baimers had been numerous, and there were many different languages. The problem had been solved by the transplantation of the telepathic nerve. Well, that tied in. Vulcan, if there ever was one, was—a planet of nerves!

How much of a planet of nerves it really was, I was to find out in no uncertain terms.

Well, that was the beginning. I made known our request for help in repairing the ship, and the Baimer chieftain granted it unstintingly. Shortly after this conversation, we were shown a tent, and Will and I slept, for we were dog-tired. Slept? For me it was a nightmare, with Edith Dupré, Zondat and myself struggling on the lip of an erupting volcano—Volcano, Vulcan—the two words became mixed, and I remembered that they had the same origin . . . and I remembered also that Edith Dupré had started to say something about a volcano in her message. . . .

**“SID! SID!”** Will’s voice blasted in my ear as he shook me awake.

This was two days later—rather, forty-eight hours later, as there is no day and night on Vulcan. We had already started repairs on the ship, and the chief of this tribe of Baimers himself was our main help. He attached himself to us, smiling his slow smile, using his great strength and that of one of the tribesmen to pry the giant meteorite loose from its grip on our ship.

The chief—his name was Oro Tarkid—even supplied heavy metallic instruments which we could use as crowbars. The torn armor plates were carefully pulled loose from the delicate traceries of gas-orifices which led to the jets. Four of the gas-orifices were hopelessly mangled. The rest, we noted with relief, would take repairs. We started to work with the single oxy-torch Zondat had left us, still using the Baimer’s strength.

We took our time, during those two days, never dreaming that something was happening under our very noses that would make us wish we had hurried and finished the job. For something was happening, something I couldn’t understand. I first

noticed it on the second day of our stay, as we worked on the ship. Oro Tarkid, chief of this tribe of Baimers, kept looking skyward.

“Sky falling in?” I demanded, remembering the story of the panicky hen that got hit on the head with a falling star.

Oro Tarkid did not smile that slow smile which made him seem like a great ten-foot child sometimes.

“No,” he muttered in troubled tones. “But the Time draws near, my great friend, Sid.”

“What time?”

Will was always exasperated when these telepathic conversations took place, because he understood only what I said. What the Baimers said was garble. “What does it matter what time it is?” he snarled, wrapping his powerful hands around No. 10 orifice and pulling it back into place by main strength. “We’ll never get off this planet alive.”

Oro Tarkid could not answer my question. He looked at me in puzzled fashion, as if struggling with the thoughts my question brought, and—other thoughts, thoughts that hardly could be grasped.

“Look at the sky, friend Sid,” he said lowly. “It is in the Fourth Brightness, and the pictures of the spirits that are thrown on the sky are more excited. See how they dance, and spiral—see the sheets of flame that leap from the Rim. And all around us, the ghosts of our fathers flare into being on the points of metal about us. Yes, the Time draws near.”

Will yelled for me. I went. Later on, thinking the matter over during the gay, festive period before sleep, I decided some sort of a ritual was about due, and let it go at that. True, now that I looked at the sky, the fantastic celestial tapestries which embroidered and blanketed it at the same time, *were* more active. And I felt a sinister throb of superstition. The polar light, the aurora born from the conflicts of Sun-bombarded particles with the magnetic fields, was growing more intense—and within me there was a tightening of nerves, a foreboding of evil. Zondat. Zondat, I thought, *this is your planet, a planet where telepathy and psychic phenomena dwell, where hypnotism races about on wings of magnetism. A planet you, with your devilish soul, could think*

up, manufacture out of thought. You, god of the planet . . . and all this time Will and I are in your power. . . . I cursed angrily, out loud, to rid myself of a thought that held terror and madness, and those Baimers near ceased their childlike merry-making until I forced a grin.

And on the second day, the troubled expression that had been on the face of the gentle Oro Tarkid was mirrored in the faces of his tribesmen—men, women, children. They brooded. There was no gaiety. They looked upward at the sky—*at the Spirit Pictures*. They looked at the towering incandescent Giants of Light on the Rim of the Never-Never Land. I found myself whispering to Will, and my nerves were thrumming so that I had to exert every ounce of my will-power to remain calm, to stay on the job.

**T**HAT DAY Oro Tarkid and his men were of no help to us. They fidgeted, looking at the sky. It was in the Fifth Brightness.

*"The Time is soon. The Time is soon."*

Everywhere about me I heard the muted, rumbling whispers of these simple people.

Everywhere through the village the people wandered aimlessly, uneasily studying the sky.

I blew up in exasperation, caught Oro Tarkid by the arm.

"In the name of Heaven," I yelled. "You're driving us nuts, Oro! We can't work, we can't do anything with you people mooning around. It's—"

But I stopped. I looked at Oro and pity flooded me. The soul of Oro Tarkid, leader of these people, was sick. His large albino eyes pleaded with me, pleaded with me for I knew not what.

I said huskily, "We'll help you, Oro. We'll do anything—if you'll tell us, give us some idea—"

Will made wild motions at me. "You're committing yourself, Sid," he chattered. "You're making wild promises. Remember me? *I'm your friend, I'm the one who should have some consideration—*" He dribbled off hopelessly, and it was strange, but I thought I saw in Will's eyes an expression of horror, as he looked at me. He was remembering the nerve that had been transplanted into my arm, the nerve that surely made me part



Bainer . . . In Will's eyes, part Bainer!

I lay in my dark bark-tent during the sleep-period later on, and a monstrous thought was growing in my head, entangling my soft brain in sinuous, intangible tentacles. I could not evict it. It stayed. It drummed at me, this thought: *To the Rim, in the Sixth Brightness, you will now go. Toward your destiny, toward where the Light Giants cavort, on the Edge of, the Molten Land.*

*Go! In the Sixth Brightness!*

On that insidious thought I was drugged to sleep—and wakened hours later with Will's cry blasting in my ear.

"Sid! Sid! You have to get up—they're leaving us!"

I was on my feet, my brain crystallizing into cold, calculating thought. I dressed in my whipcords, pulled my heavy shirt on, then faced Will, where he stood wringing his hands, his face pallid with a terror he could not understand.

"I know," I told him grimly. "And by the Lord, they have to be stopped. They're on the way to—*hell.*"

I brushed Will aside, pushed through the tent flap—apparently none too soon, for a group of Baimers was working on our tent. They pulled a rip cord, and the whole tent magically folded up. One loaded it over his massive shoulders, the others scooped up bedding, ornaments,

everything. They threw it all on top a wobble-wheeled cart, and took hold of the wagon-tongues and moved off.

The sky was a madhouse of light. It was the Sixth Brightness.

I looked up Oro Tarkid, but already he was moving off, at the head of his tribespeople. The village was folded up, gone as if it never existed, and there were nothing but carts, and solemn-faced Baimers, moving with giant pace off toward the brightest, fieriest spot on the horizon. "Oro Tarkid!" I yelled, panting beside his giant stride.

He looked down at me from his great height, and it seemed as if for a moment he had to puzzle out who I was.

He laid a gentle hand on my shoulders. "The Time has come," he said gently. "We must go now. Thus it has been for seventeen years of our time. Always we move—toward the Rim." He paused, looked at the Rim, and I thought I saw a deadly fear twist his flat face. But it passed. He said gravely, "You may go with us."

"You can't go," I panted. "I won't let you. You don't understand. There are devilish forces working on this planet—doing something to you—I don't know—you're going off to destruction!"

For long and long he strode along with never a word. He did not look at me, but at the Rim. The titanic glory of those Sun-forged flames seemed to light his countenance with a spiritual, inner well-being.

He raised his massive arm, shook it like a crusader.

"We shall go," his voice thundered out in a paean of triumph. "We go—to *our destiny!*"

I COULD KEEP up with him no longer. I dropped behind. I fell to a sitting position, sobbing in great breaths of air, consumed with a rage that burned as fierce as the Hell toward which they were moving. I sat there, and watched them move off, swiftly, diminishing toward a great spume of cascading light on the Rim.

Will found me there, wrapped his powerful fingers around my shoulders.

He whispered huskily, "You're not going with them, Sid."

He literally dragged me back to the ship, because, the thought of the night before was pulsing in my brain, and Will knew it. He forced coffee down my throat, and in the same husky, taut tones whispered, "We're going to leave the planet, Sid, soon as we get the ship fixed."

I calmed myself, scalding my throat with coffee. Finally I looked at him, grinned. I clapped him on the shoulder in a manner that made his lip tremble. Probably he'd thought I was a goner.

"I'm no Baimer, Will," I grinned, looking him straight in the eye. "But by the Lord, you ain't got no chivalry!"

His eyes turned hopeless. "Edith Dupré!" he burst out.

"Edith Dupré," I agreed, grinning, just to show him I was pretty damned sure who was boss on this expedition. "We're not fixing the ship now. We've got plenty of power in the auxiliary rockets to take us a dozen times around this planet. Up ship! Hit heaven! We're going to find out what's what. . . ."

Will was sure, of course, that we were still obeying the whim of Zondat. I wasn't sure that we weren't myself, but no matter. This was something that had to be done. Besides, to some degree we still had free will, plenty of it, for I ordered Will to send the ship in an exactly opposite direction from that the Baimers had taken. Plainly, I wanted to make a general investigation of this habitable part of the planet Vulcan, to see if other tribes of Baimers were affected, too.

In the next three hours, we found out that they were. Half of the habitable section, that half opposite to that in which Oro Tarkid and his Baimers were moving, was entirely deserted. Yet we saw evidences of great fires, of encampments, which suggested that this half of the habitable part had very recently been populated with numberless tribes.

We zig-zagged back and forth. An incredible idea was taking shape in my mind. I made a chart to scale, which showed the location of each camp. My chart grew as we followed up the camps. Soon we came upon moving tribesmen themselves, numberless groups of them, all spaced out, distinct from each other. The location of these groups I also placed on my scaled chart.

Each group, my chart showed so far, was moving in a straight line, in a series of migrations, toward the same general spot on the horizon. I no longer wasted time charting lines. Will sent the ship along the line of motion of one group, straight toward the Rim, toward the Never-Never Land. Brighter it grew, more hellishly intense, and I was afraid that at any moment the eclipsed Sun, unbearably incandescent, would show a segment of itself over the Rim.

The point on the Rim toward which our ship plunged was a great fountain of sky-hurting fire. Now we also saw belching volumes of smoke. As we looked through the photo-amplifiers, coming closer, I gasped with sudden comprehension:

"A volcano! The volcano Edith Dupré mentioned in her message!"

Briefly struggling up the slopes of that boil-like mountain, we saw three different groups of Baimers.

On the lip of the volcano, on that side which was not erupting, hundreds of Baimers, their possessions now tied entirely to their backs, were choosing a path downward, into the interior. *Into the volcano!*

Will sent the ship back from the blinding Rim. And I, with shaking fingers, stooped over the console board with chart and pencil, and drew long, curving lines which marked the nomadic path taken by each tribe of Baimers in their series of migrations. Each line ended at the volcano.

"Look at that," I told Will hoarsely. "Tell me what it reminds you of."

He blinked. "A magnetic field?"

"That," I said, "puts you at the head of the class. A magnetic field! The volcano represents the north magnetic pole. And the path taken by each Baimer tribe, whether or not they've yet reached the volcano, is—a magnetic line of force!"

### III

THE VOLCANO was erupting, well enough! I forced Will to take the ship and land it on the volcano lip opposite where the Baimers were relentlessly pouring into its interior. Will almost had tears in his eyes.

"You can't do anything for them," he

choked. "And you can't do anything for Edith Dupré. You haven't any right to sacrifice both our lives this way."

His hands were shaking so much the ship bumped and staggered crazily when he landed it above the tremendous, yawning hole that led into Vulcan's interior.

I studied the volcano through the port. There were two widely separated craters. The other crater was spewing lava in great gulping, regurgitating motions. Fire, smoke, cinders exploded madly skyward, offering ready competition to the streamers and sheets of the aurora, even eclipsing the awesome, arched tongues of light which were thrown up by the Sun and the molten side of the planet, on the Rim still many miles distant. I thought the situation over, and I knew what we were going to do.

I threw Will's coveralls at him, forced him to get into them, while I hunched into my own. Then we left the ship, and I unrolled a Jacob's ladder which was fastened inside the ship. I dropped the Jacob's ladder into the crater. It hugged the wall, and just about reached a tortuous, winding ledge which ran around the crater, and converged with the downward volcanic path the Baimers were taking, single file. Cinders and sparks rained on us.

"You—you expect me to follow you down—down there?" Will demanded, pointing with a quivering hand.

I grinned. "Nope, Will. If you want, stay up here. I'll go down and fight it out alone. Bye bye. I may be back."

I shinnied down the Jacob's ladder without a look at Will, reached the crater path, and in no time at all, unburdened, I was pushing past stolidly plodding, strangely stupid-faced Baimers. Just as I reached the forefront of these nomads, Will came panting up beside me. He cast me a reproachful glance and I clapped him on the shoulder.

As I suspected, the migrations to the volcano occurred in spurts, on the Sixth Brightness always. Will and I made our way down and ever downward, and we were ahead of the Baimers. The only light save the dim circle from far above consisted of points of static electricity which took flame on jagged volcanic formations.

The path we were following was easy to negotiate, and looked as if it had been hewn from the lava by man-made tools.

The path broadened suddenly, loose shale sliding away underfoot, tremendous echoes being thrown back by the gaping blackness before us. And once in a while, the whole planet seemed to shake.

Will walked close to me, and a little behind.

"This part of the volcano is going to erupt, too," he muttered.

I sniffed uneasily at the air. It was sulphurous, acrid, as if fire and brimstone would soon come bubbling out of the planet's innards. Far above, the commotion raised by the feet of the descending Baimers echoed and reechoed in hollow coughings of sound. I had occasion to remember what Will had said about Zondat . . . that Zondat was controlling us. And I remembered, too, when in my brain had formed the thought, *Go! In the Sixth Brightness!* Well, I had thought when Will wakened me, that my mind during full wakefulness was able to throw off the insidious, wordless command. But had it? For—here I was, during the Sixth Brightness, far ahead of Oro Tarkid and his Baimers! I was in the crater, I was obeying the command that short hours before had made itself known to me!

A shiver froze my spine, and I stopped for a moment, trying to orient my thoughts. We would go back. I, Sidney Hallmeyer, would admit that I had completely given my mind over to control by an alien power. I would forget the Baimers, Edith Dupré . . . I would go! I would prove. . . .

Nothing! For at that moment, a shrill, rage-filled scream splattered up from the crater below, pounded at our ears.

"Get back, you vipers from Hell! Go on, I'll throw myself off into the crater before I'll—oh!"

THE WORDS vibrating, echoing and slurred, turned us around in our tracks. In the flickering gloom, on the path a dozen feet beneath us, three shadowy figures seemed locked in mortal combat on the very edge of perdition. And farther down on the path, struggling upward, came two other figures, brandishing weapons.

"Come on, Will!" I cried. I broke into a run downward, ignoring the possibility of falling into that awesome cavity. I reached the three struggling figures, by

main force wrested one of them loose. For a moment, I was struggling with a tigress who made the air hideous with her howls. I thrust her back into Will's arm, then charged head-on into her assailants. They were both ready to fire. My elbows went up and outward. I deflected their aim. One I tripped, slapped alongside the head, and with an unbelieving cry of horror he toppled head over heels into the chasm. I grabbed the gun-arm of the other. It fired. The explosive projectile sent a half ton of rock-lava into the crater whence it had come.

I twisted the man backward until I was leaning over his savagely contorted, bearded face. He let out a gurgling choke, gave a wild effort, and next thing I knew, we were rolling and tossing on the edge of the crater path.

Behind me, Will roared. He had a fight on his hands. I was suddenly underneath, saw Will through bloodshot eyes. The girl gouged him in the belly with her knee, and Will gave her an open-handed slap, dropped her, and leaped straight over us at the other two men running up the path.

I thought I was done. My air was being cut off. My neck was breaking. I felt myself beginning to fall, to slip over the edge. I gurgled horribly, somehow got my hands free and grabbed the fellow by his belt. I literally lifted him over my head with the last of my strength. I held him there, until his clawing hands released my neck; and I didn't have the strength to throw him in any direction. If I dropped him, his weight would center on my head, and I'd go into the crater with him.

I saw the girl rising from her prone position. She saw the tableau. She wobbled toward us, leaning on the wall, and when she reached us, she raised her booted foot and pushed against the man I held aloft. His mouth opened in an ugly, soul-wrenching cry. He slipped sideways from my grasp and followed his companion into Vulcan's core. His scream dribbled away . . . and I was conscious of hands pulling me back from my precarious position.

Will helped me to my feet, and I just breathed for a while. I looked down the path. There was a man lying there with a hole through his throat. I looked at Will. He held two Hamptons in his hands.



He was panting heavily, his expression wild. He gave me one of the Hamptons.

"We're armed now," he panted, wiping his mouth with his arm. "Those other two, one in the crater, one dead. Okay. Let's get out of here. We've got Edith Dupré."

I turned my attention to the girl. She was leaning against the wall, trembling, her breast heaving. She looked at us with great long-lashed grey eyes, and got out between gulps of air:

"Are you two the rescue party? If so, and *ipso facto*, we'd better clear ether before the rest of the big bad wolf's whelps take it into their heads to huff and puff."

She flung back her flaxen hair, fiddled around with it until it was snugged behind her ears. She dusted her hands, dusted off her corduroy breeches, and dusted her hands again, then shakily stood erect.

I just stared at her.

"Listen," she said, her eyes narrowing, "I've been shadow-boxing with that same look you've got in your eyes ever since I got here six months ago. Said expression emanating from Dr. Roberto Zondato—only I guess yours is more respectful—I hope."

"Listen," I said in the same tone, "you're just an item of curiosity as far as I'm concerned, and I was just staring at you because I didn't think a toughie like you've got the reputation for being would have to keep *any* man at arm's length. I've heard that men look at you and decide to stick by their wives. I've heard that you walk into a bar and nobody even knows there's a woman in the room. I've heard—"

"You've heard, you've heard, you've heard," she mimicked, but beneath the smudge and grime on her sweating face a flood of dull red showed. She put her hands on her trim hips—hands that were plainly scratched and had dried blood on them. She said grimly, "I don't propose to stand here and toss arguments back and forth. What am I supposed to do now, rescue you?"

"You started it," I reminded her, "and besides, we're not a rescue party, so I guess you'll have to rescue yourself."

"What?"

I explained. I said with satisfaction,

"So you're just an incidental, see? You're going up and we're going down."

I QUIETED Will's howl of protest with a single look. I said, looking straight into her incredulous eyes, "You see, Miss Dupré, we lived with a tribe of Baimers for a couple days. They're a good and simple people, and I don't propose to see them duped by Dr. Roberto Zondat—however, he's duping them."

She looked up and down the pathway as if her nerves, held in control, were giving way. She said huskily, "The same thing happened to you that happened to me. I can see that. There's a Baimer telepathetic nerve grafted into your wrist. You're acting on the will of Zondat."

"Are you, breaking away from him like this?" I demanded.

She looked startled. "No. No, I can't be. I kicked one of his men into the abyss—he *certainly* wouldn't want me to do that—"

I felt a burst of relief, as if I had been given reprieve from a death sentence. "Well, don't you see?" I cried. "You warned us of a telepathic impulse, in your radio message. We were armed against it, we could fight it. When you first landed on the planet, you knew nothing about it—"

She slumped. "You're right. I guess so. But you can't go down into that nest of space-rats—"

"Zondat is down there?" I demanded eagerly.

She closed her eyes wearily, and I had the incredible picture of an Edith Dupré the interplanetary newscasters had never portrayed. An Edith Dupré who could be spattered with grime and filth and dust, her blouse torn, and still show a pure, childlike loveliness; an Edith Dupré who could stand up to a man or stand beside him, and fight to the last drop, but who could be driven to a womanly weakness, the shedding of a tear. For her eyes were wet when she looked at me again.

"I guess you mean what you say," she muttered. "You want to go down there and finish Zondat and his men—a job I should have done maybe," she added with bitterness. "But I was sick to death of that down there, with Zondat pawing me all the time, the beast. You want

me to go back down there with you? I could help you."

"Well—"

Will Carrist looked at us hopelessly, then at his Hampton. He gave a blistering curse. He snarled, "Come on, then. Let's go!"

Edith Dupré walked between us. For ten minutes we wound down, into the crater. Then she took the lead with a whispered word, and suddenly drew us behind a rock, and into a great cavern that ballooned fierily over our heads.

She led us across the floor of the cavern, which was nothing less than a great natural bubble blown in the crater side by volcanic gases.

Suddenly there was a titanic sound, and the floor beneath us rose up against our feet, threw us flat on our faces. I grasped at a protruding bubble of stone, my eyes popping. But it was over soon enough.

"That happens all the time," Edith Dupré said bitterly. "But Zondat has a vulcanologist—a volcano expert, so-called, who claims this side of the volcano hasn't got a chance to blow her top. Bunk! The old girl is slated to go any minute, the way I feel about it. But, of course, I'm no fancy vulcanologist. . . . This, by the way, is my own, privately owned bubble—I discovered it. Below us, all around

this territory, there are hundreds of other bubbles. Zondat's empire, you see. Nobody else knows about this bubble, which is the reason I was able to send out radio messages."

**S**HE STOPPED near a flickering ledge, and I saw a mass of tubes, and ultra-wave equipment all connected together in the most jumbled sort of way. An ultra-radio! And it was heavily insulated.

"I built it myself," she said carelessly. "Swiped the parts from Zondat's store-room one at a time, brought 'em up here, and assembled it. This is my hide-out."

She gestured to other ledges. We saw stacks of canned goods, thin wax plates, utensils for eating. "Sometimes," said Edith Dupré, I wanted to be alone—I had to get away from that bunch of pawing, nervous idiots." She shuddered. "How I ever straight-armed the boys away this long is a mystery to me. . . . And then, just an hour ago, I discovered that there was a natural exit from this bubble into the crater, and I could escape. As luck would have it, four of Zondat's thugs saw me from below and they started up after me. I don't think that Zondat knows what happened, even yet, probably. Now come on over here."

She led us to a far side of the bubble, and Will and I walked on tiptoe, unconsciously. Zondat was below!

He was below. Edith Dupré scraped away loose powdered lava from a place in the floor of the bubble, revealing the tiniest, eye-sized hole. Will put his eye to it, gasped. I shoved him away and took a look. Another huger bubble spread out below, a sphere of static lights. One side of the bubble was carved out into the shape of rooms, and there was a group of dull-eyed Bainers working with flare-torches, leveling the floor of the bubble, filling in hollows. And in one of the partially completed rooms, I saw a mass of strange equipment.

Zondat was seated before it, and we could see his thin, nervously twitching face, pointed tongue plucking at his thin blond mustache. Two electrode-like objects were clamped to his temples. His hands made a rheostat adjustment.

Several of Zondat's men stood around. They were obviously guards—serving the



Edith

dual purpose of guarding their chief and his machinery, and keeping the Baimers working. I noted their extreme nervousness. They hopped around. They lighted cigarettes chain fashion. Their faces twitched. All their motions were bird-like, quick. They exuded nervous energy the way the volcano above us was exuding lava.

I rose slowly, looked at Edith Dupré for explanation.

She shrugged slim shoulders, smiled bitterly. "That isn't the whole set-up, Sidney Hallmeyer—Sidney, maybe I should say. There're other bubbles, and they're full of Baimers—slaves, as you guessed. The Baimers, you see, are Zondat's subjects. Zondat knows he can't ever return to Earth or any other habitable planet. So he's going to make Vulcan his empire. I think his idea was to make me his queen—or maybe he was going to attach some other monicker to me, I don't know. Queen Edith," she mused, and for the first time she broke into an open-hearted grin.

AND for the first time, I think, I felt my first emotion toward this strange girl. Something caught in my throat, my head swam a little. And she must have seen the look in my eyes. There was a tension between us that was not caused by the madly swirling magnetic currents which impinged down here, far below Vulcan's surface. When her face burned a little, I knew it was not from anger, but from a pleasure which she tried to hide, and couldn't.

"That's a telepathic machine down there!" she blurted, and she could have said nothing that would sooner shock me back from a dream-world where Edith Dupré was centralized as the main incandescent body.

"A telepathic—" I began, and stopped. Of course. No man could possess the sheer mental power to "convert" thousands of men and women to his phony religion by means of hypnosis. Not without some kind of mechanical help. "So he used a telepathic machine on Earth, too," I said slowly.

She nodded casually. "Quite a guy, that Roberto Zondato. Earth has a magnetic field, same as Vulcan. Only

not as intense. The men who committed suicide were under the power of a machine which amplified the telepathic, or hypnotic vibrations of Zondat's mind. Zondat worked hand in glove with a Professor Borge. Borge is here, too. He invented the machine."

"The machine probably works better on Vulcan," I put in.

"Naturally. Zondat knows Vulcan'll be discovered by explorers sooner or later, so he's drawing the entire population underground with him—slaves for his bubble empire. You see, those Baimers can't help coming lickety-split for the volcano. I know, because I lived with them a few months, just about the time Zondat put the machine into operation. Whenever the Sixth Brightness came, they'd start migrating, me with 'em. Nice people, the Baimers," she said simply.

Will was jiggling around. "This volcano must be the north magnetic pole of the planet. And telepathic waves travel along magnetic lines of force."

She smiled at him. "Righto, prof. That chart was the straight goods. In a way, the Baimers *are* a living magnetic field. Not like the iron filings, though, because the Baimers are drawn along the lines of force by telepathic currents. Since the lines of force end in the volcano—presto! A sweet plan the good doctor has thunk up."

I was looking at the eye-sized hole in the floor of bubble. Edith Dupré disillusioned me. She had often thought of sending a bullet through that hole. But it was too small. The bullet would clog up the hole before it ever hit Zondat. The commotion would just mean they'd discover her bubble.

The shock of her astounding revelation held me speechless . . . Emperor Zondat. It was only slowly, that I dragged my mind back to face reality. I talked it over with Edith Dupré, and it was then that I noticed for the first time that her nerves were as badly shot as those of Zondat's men I had seen below. I could see her hands clasping together, and unclasping, then clenching. It was only by sheer will that she was keeping herself together. I said nothing. But she had been on this planet six months—a planet of nerves. . . .

Well, Will and I were on edge, too. Not as badly of course, but bad enough. If we stayed here six months—? And a fleeting wonder entered my mind. Why weren't the Baimers, inhabitants of this planet, addicted to the same nervous hysteria? What gave them their immunity? I was to find out. . . .

Edith Dupré said, forcing her voice to casualness, "The plan of action is yours to figure, Sidney. My only suggestion is—well, we have to capture the telepathic transmitter. Outside of that, you take the lead. If I'd have been in my right mind, I wouldn't have come back down here with you."

"But," I said plainly, "you lived with the Baimers, too, for awhile. You know what a simple-hearted people they are—and generous."

She sneered. "Okay, so I'm soft-hearted—and soft-headed, too. It doesn't matter. I'll stick it out. I'll show you how to get to the bubbles below. Maybe if I can get hold of a Hampton, too, maybe by knocking out one of Zondat's men, we can fight our way to the telepathic transmitter. Let's go!"

And she led the way, Will following nervously after me. We followed a toothed crevice downward which hardly gave us room to squeeze past. Dagger points of static electricity licked snappingly at our faces. We came forth into a smaller bubble below. The girl made a *ssh*-ing sound, and we flattened ourselves against the wall. A half-hundred feet distant, thirty Baimers were working with shovels and flare-torches and wheelbarrels. They were cutting out rooms. I reflected that Zondat's equipment was of the worst. With all the advantages of civilization, little manpower would have been needed. But here, on an out-of-the-way planet, human energy, instead of mechanical, was necessary in quantity.

The Baimers moved lumberingly, like beasts, their big flat, mushroom-colored faces robbed of intelligence. Standing guard over them were two of Zondat's men.

I made a whispered command to Will. He looked at me imploringly, but I made a fierce gesture. We moved off in opposite directions, and Edith Dupré moved farther back into the bubble, casting me

a final look of confidence before she moved behind a lava-blister.

I felt a burning confidence, too. It would be child's work to finish off those two thugs, then work our way into the next bubble, where Zondat had his quarters. The goal was plainly in sight.

Too plainly, perhaps!

I heard a sound behind me. A fiery, acid ball of panic solidified in my stomach. I tried to turn. My foot slipped on rubble, I went crashing down with enough racket to wake up the sleepy volcano beneath us. I scrambled to my feet in time to have a figure hurtle toward me, shove a hand in my face and send me somersaulting toward the lower floor of the bubble. The figure flung itself on top of me, face tight and purposeful. An arm silhouetted against the lustrous radiance of the bubble ceiling and came crashing down. An arm holding a Hampton by the barrel. The butt of the Hampton crashed glancingly from my head, and for me the universe simply vanished, without the herald of bursting stars. . . .

**I** CAME TO. I sat up. I surged to my feet, went reeling senselessly around a square little room. I grabbed at bars, trying to hold myself up. I sank with a groan, rolled over and saw Will. He was lying prone, dried blood on his head. I crawled to him and croaked his name. I knew he was dead. He didn't move—not for a few minutes. Then he whimpered, his every muscle stiffened, and his eyes were looking up at me.

"They've got us," I croaked. I waved at the bars, imbedded in lava. "We're Zondat's prisoners. God knows what happened to the girl."

Will sat up, shaking. He wandered around the little lava room, staggering as I had done. Then he voicelessly sat down, his eyes miserable. He said nothing, but I felt that he was accusing me, and I rolled over, not knowing how to answer his accusation. He was right. We'd been fools to think we could get the best of Zondat. Probably he'd known all the time exactly what we were doing—just as Will had said. Zondat had another couple of suckers on his string.

I slept, wearily—and I was awakened violently. Somebody roared at me, hoisted

me to my feet and slapped me brutally on the face. I tore away, but a guard had his Hampton centered on us.

"You," he roared, little points of light dancing in his conscienceless eyes. "The Doc wants to see you. Move!"

He kicked at us, sent us through the open cell gate. We went staggering and reeling through bubble after bubble, through little tunnels, two blood-caked, filthy, miserable objects. The thug behind us constantly ripped out a stream of epithets, foul and insulting. Now and then he kicked at us, sent us sprawling.

We passed groups of working Baimers. The men guarding them took time out to kick at us, too. Their guffaws, high-pitched, hysterical, echoed like nightmares in our ears.

Neurotic, I remember thinking. Neurotic, nerve-maddened beasts. They were charged with a nervous energy that came from an external source. From the magnetic currents generated by the action of a solar and a planetary magnetic field overlapping. Any opportunity to rid themselves of that store of nervous energy was eagerly seized. Their brutal treatment of us was a manifestation of that.

Nor was it any different when we at last faced Dr. Roberto Zondat. A mahogany door was thrust open, and, save for the static effulgences that lighted the room, this might have been an expensive, leather-paneled office in a modern metropolitan city. Zondat apparently had made every effort to insulate this office from magnetic effects. He hadn't succeeded.

He bounced to his feet as we were halted before his plastiglass-top desk. He held a long cigarette holder in his hands, and the cigarette holder shook so that the smoke ascended spiraling.

"Ah, spacemen," he burst out shrilly. "So. What were you trying to do? Destroy my men? Murder them? How did you get into that bubble? Did you come in with the rest of my slaves? Impossible. I demand an answer."

"I don't know," I said in a drugged tone. "I don't remember anything. We were with the Baimers. Suddenly we weren't with them. We got lost. I don't know where we got the Hamptons either. It's like a dream. I don't understand. . . ."

Will kept his face stupid, but I heard his breath suck in as he caught the nature of my deception. Groggy I was, but I still had sense enough to admit nothing they didn't already know. How much they knew was a question.

"I—I hardly know what's happening," I said vaguely. "Ever since—"

Zondat walked up and down in front of us excitedly.

"You lie!" he cried. He slapped me across the face, stepped quickly back from me, his eyes shifting over my body. He crushed his cigarette. "You must tell me what is going on. I'll make you work ten times as hard as any Baimer if you don't tell me the truth. Nor am I beyond torture. I'll hypnotize you—"

"Oh, good Heavens, Doc," said a voice behind us. "You couldn't hypnotize a flea—not in your state of nerves."

I held myself rigid, tried not to give the slightest indication I knew that voice.

ZONDAT said sharply, "By what right do you enter my office without permission, Edith? Why do you interrupt me? Don't you know— And besides, I have sent some of my men to Venus to get a new nerve medicine. The nervous troubles which afflicts us all will be cleared up."

"Bunk! You tried medicines before. You'll never cure yourselves—nor me either—in a million years; not unless we get off the planet."

And Edith Dupré walked into our line of vision, and sprawled out in a chair, her long legs spread out and crossed. She was a vision of clean beauty—the dirt and grime gone, her hair bunched up neatly against her neck, cosmetics applied to her face. Her cool, long-lashed eyes swept over Will and me without much interest.

"Quit using up those nerves on these miserable specimens. They look as stupid as the Baimers. Whatever they did, they did while they were under your control."

"It's a mystery how they did it," raged Zondat. His quivering hand tried to light a cigarette. He threw the match away savagely. At that moment, the whole room joggled about, blurred. Zondat staggered against his desk. Will and I fought to retain our balance. It was a minor earthquake.

A man who had been sitting in the corner, jumped to his feet when that happened, his chunky face paling.

On him Zondat turned, fuming. "Fool! You told me we had nothing to fear!"

The vulcanologist's dark eyes blazed at Zondat, cracked with sudden hate. Then his expression was blank.

"Nor have we," he said smoothly. He subsided into his chair. "This is a double volcano—a rare phenomenon on any world. I've explained that before. Our probe of this crater took us miles beneath the surface of Vulcan. Seismographic studies show conclusively that this crater will never erupt. It is dead. You have nothing to fear."

Zondat's hands flung over his head. "Nothing to fear!" he half-screamed. "While the earth breaks apart under our feet!"

The other kept his gaze steady on Zondat. "Mild earth tremors which have their origin in the other volcano. These bubbles are hundreds of thousands of years old. I've charted the amount of crumbling over that period. It has been negligible. It is not the planet which is breaking up, Doctor Zondat—it is your nerves."

Zondat trembled. He was beaten down by the steady eyes of the vulcanologist. He sank into his chair behind his desk, sat with his forehead resting on the heels of his hands.

"You are right," he said in stronger tones. "We must find a good nerve medicine soon." He spoke without raising his head. "Guard. Take these spacemen to the Baimers' quarters. See that they bathe themselves, rest and eat. Then put them to work with the Baimers. Go."

Will and I shuffled out, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Edith Dupré suck in on her cigarette, her eyes closing a little as she did so—but one eye came down a little bit more than the other; a wink. Then she casually flicked ashes on the carpeted floor.

And Dr. Roberto Zondat's fancy underworld office was the last glimpse of luxury we had for a month—as we figured it later. We were the merest beasts. We were dull-witted animals. We were so weary when the sleep-period rang that we didn't have any trouble wearing the stupid expressions that were the Baimers'. We staggered

into our corner of the tremendous bubble which housed the thousands of enslaved Baimers and sagged into a drugged sleep. I felt an enormous pity for Will Carrist. He had been more than right. I'd had no right to force him on this mission. And as the empty, monotonous, terrible days passed, I became certain that we would die here, slaves to Zondat, under the surface of a planet whose existence, as far as scientists knew, was only mythical. A Frenchman in the early half of the nineteenth century had reported seeing a trans-Mercurian planet moving across the face of the Sun. Later investigators had found nothing, had concluded that the dark speck was only a Sunspot. It might well be years before man discovered Vulcan again.

OUR WORK was the work of animals, at first. Zondat was engaged in transforming a giant complexity of bubble-caverns into an underground city. The floors of the bubbles first were leveled, or filled in. We worked fourteen hours a day wheel-barrowing gneiss, shattered rock, lava dust from one bubble to another. The gravity of Vulcan was perhaps one-fourth that of Earth, and yet the work was harrowing.

Now and then we had an opportunity to see finished rooms. Zondat's men very apparently were making trips to the other planets, and returning with tools, food, plumbing, air-conditioning machinery. The finished compartments had plumbing, mirrors, and a little furniture. The kitchens, which were centrally located, were already operating. Heat was being pumped in from the other half of this double volcano.

"This isn't for the Baimers, though," Will said *sotto voce* to me as he panted along behind with his load. "They'll be slaves. Zondat will bring in criminals from all over the Solar System."

That was my thought. Zondat's "empire" would end up as a pirate-base, from which merchant shipping and lonely outposts would be ravaged pitilessly.

Now and again there were minor earthquakes. Sometimes big ones, full of thunderous noise. But those bubbles stood intact, as they had for hundreds of thousands of years. And, of course, I thought, they would stand intact for another million. . . .



The first three weeks of our torment passed without incident. The next week? Well, because we were human beings, and because we seemed able to exert our initiative, unlike the Baimers, we were given flare torches to wield. These were not unlike oxy-torches, save that they fanned out a small, fan-shaped, invisible ray which bombarded the lava with tiny particles, cutting it cleanly. Under supervision, we cornered out rooms. Tedious work, but better than the other.

There were other changes for us in that week, Oro Tarkid! It was everything I could do to restrain myself when I saw his giant frame come slogging into the giant bubble which housed thousands of Baimers during the eating and sleeping periods. I sidled up next to him, jugged him roughly, so that he turned his massive head downward to look at me.

He looked at me with the eyes of a stranger, this simple, great-hearted Baimer, his eyes vapid, his lips relaxed idiotically.

"Oro Tarkid!" I whispered pleadingly. "It's I—Sidney Hallmeyer! You can't have forgotten—"

Had he forgotten? I felt a great burst of pity, a surge of hatred for Zondat, whose inhuman machine kept him and thousands of others in telepathic thrall. But I kept on whispering his name, reminding him, orally blasting him from that horrible trance. And his eyes blinked.

"I—remember," he said slowly. "My great friend Sidney."

"We are both in great trouble!" I gritted. "Remember, Oro Tarkid—remember everything; for the time comes when your people must escape!"

"We are in great trouble," he repeated dully. "We have done nothing, to be thus torn away from our lands. I—I do not understand. . . ."

A guard was only a dozen steps ahead, examining us with his nervous merciless eyes.

I whispered upward to Oro Tarkid, hurriedly, "We shall fight the terrible wrongs done us, Oro Tarkid! Remember what I say! Be on your guard! Be ready! Remember me!"

I dropped my head stupidly, as we passed the feeding booths. I took my tasteless soup and my bread and ate soul-

lessly. Then I went back to the corner of the bubble where Will and I slept. I whispered excitedly to Will about the chief of the Baimer tribe.

Will lay with one elbow propping up his head. He looked at me with sick disgust, then turned away, his shoulders twitching uncontrollably.

"It won't do any good," he said.

"You've given up?" I demanded.



*Sidney Hallmeyer*

HE FACED ME again, and spoke in muted, raging tones. "Giving up, Sid? Are you crazy? Don't you know we're goners? We can't stand this work. Another three months and it'll kill us. Some of the Baimers have already died from the work and the confinement. I heard some of the guards talking about it—those crazy, murderous guards! Sid," he panted, "I'm not going to stay here. I'm going to escape, I don't care if you don't go with me, but I mean it. It was your fault—"

"Quiet," I snapped, and I was horrified to know that my own voice was as tinnily nervous as his. I said through gritted teeth, "You couldn't escape, anyway."

"Couldn't I?" He laughed nastily. "Every day we pass the fissure which leads up to that—that girl's bubble. I

could slip in there, and no one would be the wiser. I'd go up the crater—"

"And fight your way through Baimers on the way down?"

"No," he said insistently. "It isn't the Sixth Brightness. You can tell that by the brightness of this bubble. It's only during the Sixth and Seventh Brightness that the Baimers migrate. The time of the greatest magnetic disturbance. When Vulcan is closest to the Sun."

And I knew he was right. At the most, this was only the Third Brightness. Vulcan was four or five million miles from the Sun. But her orbit was carrying her closer, closer. Edith Dupré had given us the hint in her ultra-wave message. Vulcan's orbit has a minor axis of seven million miles, a major axis of thirteen. And certainly the year of the planet would be in the order of seven or eight days. At its closest, three million miles from the Sun, the planet's magnetic field became so intense that the magnetic lines of force were able to carry the telepathic waves emanating from Zondat's machine; carry them much as a copper wire conducts electricity. Down those magnetic lines of force the Baimers were compelled to move, on the Sixth and Seventh Brightnesses. . . .

That much we knew.

I held Will's eyes for a long moment, but he glared back at me without faltering.

I said savagely, "You're letting your nerves get you."

"Letting them?" He gave that nasty, jagged laugh again. "How about you? How about everybody down here? The Baimers, too! Look at them! They can't sleep. They toss around. They mutter. They get up and walk around when the guards aren't looking. Did you watch those Baimers we were working with today? They got ants walking around under their skin. Their faces twitch. Oh, they're under a telepathic control, down here where the machine can exert its full force and doesn't have to depend on the strength of the magnetic field. But the machine can't keep magnetic currents from playing hell with their nerves any more than Zondat can find a medicine good enough to quiet the nerves of himself and his men!"

He groaned and rolled over and his

muffled voice said, "Sooner or later, everybody down here will go—nuts!"

I said nothing more. I was aghast at the possibility of Will leaving me, to fight a hopeless battle alone. But then, Will wasn't Will any longer. He was somebody else. He'd been a melancholy, nervous type to start with. Chances were, he'd forget me, forget everything, and bolt. I bit my lip hard, because that pain was better than the pain of thinking of Will throwing me over. . . .

I couldn't sleep. I kept watching the thousands of Baimers, crowded together, with their possessions bunched around them. They'd brought their possessions, strapping them on their backs. I saw their bark tents, their great metal pots, their utensils, their musical instruments—piled around them, untouched. Some of them were new arrivals, like Oro Tarkid and his tribe. It had taken them perhaps three different migrations before they entered the volcano. Three weeks. The newcomers, I saw, slept. Those who had been here for weeks, for months—they were the ones whose nerves were getting them.

*Why?*

**T**HE THOUGHT pounded at me. Why had the Baimers, left to themselves on the surface of their planet, shown no signs of nervous hysteria? What had given them their immunity? Oro Tarkid had said something about it, something about the structure of their nervous systems, which had adapted themselves to the planet. But that couldn't be true. They were still on the planet, they still had that same nervous structure.

Was it some facet of their daily life, some food, some ritual inherited from their ancestors which had made them immune to the dreadful neurotic tendencies that so mercilessly flogged Zandot, his men, Edith Dupré, Will, myself?—something they didn't have down here?

I almost had the answer! It nagged at the back of my mind, and somehow I knew it was of tremendous importance that I bring it into my consciousness. But it hovered on the borderline of reason—I could not put into tangible thought. It was like a name one tries to remember, and in trying, defeats his purpose. I threw the whole problem away with a burst of

rage, rolled over on the smooth, hard, yet warm lava floor and abruptly slept.

Two more work-periods passed. On the third, for the first time since I had begun this life of the damned, I saw Edith Dupré. She came swinging through the smooth-floored bubble where I was working, with her Zondat; a big hulking man whom I guessed was Borge, the scientist; and several of Zondat's space-rats. I wanted to sink through the floor, for I was a miserable, filthy, hollow-eyed creature, more dirt than flesh. It was blasphemous to look at her, but I did, with my heart in my eyes. She was a fire of loveliness, a rare flower in a sordid setting.

Her cool gaze passed casually over me. It was only because Zondat was talking heatedly with Borge, and because his men were walking in front, clearing the way, that her mannishly swinging arms were able to release the little, square white object that fell at my feet. Her arms did not stop swinging. She passed through a tunnel into another bubble.

I put my foot on the square white object, my shaking hands guiding the flare-torch. At the first opportunity, I scooped it up, slid it into my pocket. And until the next sleep period came, I did not know what it was. Then I found out. A sheet of paper, folded until it was only an inch and a half square, made compact with a rubber band. I feverishly spread it out on the floor, shielding it from sight of the nervously pacing guard with my body.

Will watched me wearily.

"It's a note from Edith Dupré," I said, my voice tense. I read:

*"Sidney: The volcano is going to do its stuff. Any minute, or maybe next week. This is the straight goods. Chamberlain the vulcanologist told me. He's got it in for Zondat, always has had. So he gave him the wrong dope. Chamberlain wants me to elope to a healthier clime with him, and promises to cherish me. I said nix, and promised not to tell Zondat. Chamberlain is lop-sided in the beam. Maybe I am, too, but I want to stay here and help you on the Baimer problem. Are you going to stick around and help them out of their mess? If so, on the other side of this paper are some directions for operat-*

*ing the telepathic transmitter. If you can get control, half your problem's solved.*

*"It's the other half of this double volcano that's causing the trouble—something Chamberlain admits he didn't foresee. There's a thin wall separating the two fissures. Fissures are getting closer. Maybe right now, or next week, the lid will blow off—no bubbles. No nothing. Do you want to face the music or hit for the open spaces. I'll do everything I can to help you.*

*Edith."*

I stopped reading, my voice hoarse, shaken.

I knew Will's eyes were on me.

"Well?" he said huskily. "She's put it up to you."

I turned the paper over, but for the moment, the diagrams Edith Dupré had scrawled there blurred. I said at last, without looking at Will, "Will, you can do what you like. You know what the score is. Hot lava and fire are going to break through from the other volcano—almost any minute, maybe. I wouldn't keep you down here with me if you didn't want to take the chance. But I—well, I'm going to stay. I've got an idea—I think it's an idea—it's going to solidify any second."

"Like the volcano," Will's voice came, acid with sarcasm. Then he broke down. "Sid—" His voice cracked. He couldn't say any more. He was trembling. He was scared to death, and I knew that he wanted to break to his feet and—run. Run anywhere, but away from the silently screaming menace that was liable to burst into life around us any minute.

And I felt like that, too. But I was grabbing at straws—barely keeping myself afloat when I could so easily have reached shore. Edith, Will, and I, somehow, could make a break for it alone, pass into the crater through her bubble, escape—before that crater became filled with ascending lava.

And, a still, small voice whispered from deep within me, leave the Baimers to their fate . . . the voice of conscience.

It was all I could do to force myself to study the diagrams of the telepathic transmitter control. But I did study them. Until I knew by heart which buttons, and

finger-switches to push and turn; which rheostats controlled what; how the electrodes were clamped to the head; and knew which words I would say into the transmitter.

Then I tore the paper up, buried the scraps under powdered lava, and tried to sleep. But I didn't sleep any more than Will did, any more than thousands of restlessly tossing Baimers. I was fighting to grab a thought . . . an unimportant thought which Edith Dupré had unwittingly included in her note. And suddenly, with such blinding clarity that I sat upright, my mouth open in a soundless ejaculation, I knew what it was.

*Face the music.*

And after that, as if veils had been drawn away from the nebulosities clouding my mind, as if the thought itself were an opiate, I slept, soundly.

**"ORO TARKID!"** I whispered the name fiercely. It was the next "day." Work was ended. We had eaten. Shortly we would sleep. I had scuttled swiftly among groups of dully sitting Baimers, praying that no guard would see me, or that if he did see me, he would think nothing. I had reached Oro Tarkid's tribespeople. They had gathered their processions in a heap, and as if by instinct, had crowded close together about their leaders.

Of their festive gaiety, their childlike merrymaking, there was nothing. These were not the Baimers Will and I had lived with for two days; the Vulcanites who every "evening" played their wild, lulling music.

"Oro Tarkid!" I cried, and I wormed my way up to him where he sat cross-legged, on either side of him the other two members of the ruling tribunal. I grabbed his giant arm, shook it, and as before, the slowly awakened light of intelligence came to his eyes.

"My great friend," he said slowly. "It is good. Sit with us awhile. We are all in great trouble."

I shook him some more. "No!" I cried, as loudly as I dared. "Oro Tarkid! You are the captives of an evil creature. You must think. You must break away from the spell that holds you. Now. Now is the Time! A great change is about to

come. We must all fight. Oro Tarkid, speak now! Say that your mind is fighting—that you are striving to free it of its shackles!"

Through the mass of tribespeople ran a strange eerie moaning.

"Speak!" I commanded wildly.

It was as if a creature long buried were pushing away the debris of his century-old burial, the way Oro Tarkid's mind pushed itself forward to meet my challenge.

"I will do as you say, my great friend Sid," he muttered. "If the Time has come, so be it. Command me."

"Then," I said, "command your dancers to dance, your musicians to play their instruments. Let the sounds ring out—now!"

"It shall be so. Dancers, arise. Let a space be cleared. Musicians, return to your instruments. Play the music that our forefathers handed down to us."

Oro Tarkid rose to his great height. A strange flame burned on his face. Under the mighty compulsion of his command, the tribespeople rose as one, moving back, making space for the dancers who now moved on feet of lead from the crowd, stood in drooping, spiritless poise while nine musicians took up their instruments and sat cross-legged. They looked with drugged, uncomprehending eyes at the fret boards of their giant instruments.

"Now the music must be played, Oro Tarkid," I whispered pleadingly.

*"Play!"*

The command rang out in a voice of iron. Silence sat tightly on the air, and then the air quivered with the muted thunder of one plucked string. The vibrant sound shook me to my soul, was like a giant hand that lightly touched at each Baimer here assembled. They swayed—and another sound, elfin-thin, shattered the air like so many crystal goblets.

The dancers moved, flung their arms upward.

A chord was struck, and it shook the ground. Giant fingers stroked a drum, and the hollowness of it blew holes in the ether. Four more players joined in, and a ponderous crashing of discords ascended to the roof of the bubble and echoed back, spraying like rain. The nine players played with a sudden madness, and the planet

Vulcan swayed in its orbit. They crescendoed, and the Solar System whirled ever faster. Two drums fought each other, and the Universe was chaos, stars whirling, cascading, crashing. The music sounded out, made a mockery of such insignificants as death and life, beginnings and endings, foreboding and evils, good things and bad things, erupting volcanos and Zondats. The music was all.

The dancers danced. Slowly—and faster. Stood poised on a fountain of gushing silence, pirouetted in a shower of spangled crystalline tintinnabulation.

"Play!" shouted the giant voice of the people. "Dance!"

THE CAVERN WOKE. There was an upsurge of movement. A mighty tidal wave of flesh flowed without thought toward that renewal of tribal ritual.

"Play!" shouted a thousand Baimer voices.

I stood beside Oro Tarkid. I watched the life flowing back into his great flaming face. I saw the dullness of his people washed away as a contagion caught at them. They raised their arms, swayed, pleaded with a god no human could know. I turned, my heart pounding. I fought through the crowds of Baimers, fought back to where Will was standing, mouth open, his great chest rising and falling with quick, panting breaths.

His hand closed convulsively on my shoulder.

"Sid!" he blatted. "They're playing. That music! And it does something! They're—rebellin'!"

"No," I said swiftly. "They're not rebelling. They couldn't rebel, not while they're under the control of the machine. They're just listening to the music. They can't stay away from that. It makes them remember—that music is a part of their lives. A necessary part. It's like new life."

Life it was. The giant bubble was a mass of straining motion. Thousands of Baimers were brought to their feet by the ponderous, exciting strains that sprinkled at them from the domed roof of the cavern. They faced and moved toward that rhythm. They crowded as close as they could get, then stood, and at times, where the thunder of the Baimer's

instruments halted on a peak of sound, they cried with heavy voices:

"Play! Dance!"

Could the guards stop it? I watched them. There were no more than fifteen of them at the various entrances to the giant bubble. At first they ceased their nervous pacing, stood warily still, dragging out their Hamptons, ready to use.

They conferred. Then, in groups, they nervously advanced toward the rim of that circle of Baimers.

From where we stood, we saw a group of guards pause a respectable distance from the Baimers. Then one advanced a few steps. I heard his shaken voice, entirely lacking in conviction:

"Back! Get back to your places, damn you! Move!"

They didn't move. I doubt that they heard. The guards walked in futile, nervous motions on the rim of the crowd, conferring, arguing, swearing angrily amongst themselves. More of Zondat's men came bursting through into the cavern. They stared. Then they grinned at the consternation of the guards, and lighted cigarettes and stood there and just listened, at times making cat-calls to the guards. The guards shouted angrily back at them.

"It's working, Will," I whispered tensely. "It's working!"

"What—?"

"You'll see," I promised him. "I've set a ball to rolling!"

After an hour and a half of that music, the music stopped of its own accord, not because of the guards' commands. In fact, the guards gave up. They returned to their positions at the bubble entrances, their faces tense, at first, and then relaxing.

Relaxing! And that was true of the twenty or thirty of Zondat's men who had been attracted by the commotion. They leaned against walls, quietly, smoking cigarettes, listening to—the music. A smooth relief molded their faces into new patterns. The guards themselves stopped their nervous pacing and merely listened, listened as intently as any Baimer.

And Will listened, too, sitting down with his arms locked over his knees. When the music ended, with the slow glory of the Sun sinking beneath a western horizon, the Baimers moved back to their places

in the cavern, sought their sleeping-mats—and slept.

A few moments later, Will lay full length, and he slept.

I stayed awake for awhile, in the strange quiet that now gripped the cavern. There was no motion, except for flickering points of static electricity. The guards stood in the lifeless, nerveless poise of statues. Zondat's men had disappeared back to their own quarters. Beneath me I felt the ground shake briefly, mute forerunner of the volcanic eruption that soon was to occur. But I was at peace. On this day, a great deal had been accomplished. If the eruption held off for another two work-periods—

I slept without trouble.

## V

ALL THROUGH the next work-period, I looked around for Will Carriat. I told myself he had been put on another work detail, separate from mine. In my heart I knew it was not so. I felt a leaden pain when the work-period ended and I arrived at our sleeping places and he was not there.

I remembered now that we had passed the hidden fissure leading to Edith Dupré's secretly discovered bubble; had passed it early this "morning."

Will had escaped. He had left me to fight alone.

The grief of that betrayal made me want to give up then and there. I buried my face in my hands and felt like bawling. And the music of the Baimers brought me out of it.

Yes, they had begun to play! Again, without persuasion.

I sat there, listening, looking on. It was as if a salve were smoothing out my rumpled nerves. Came the crashings, the thundering, the breathless pauses of the Baimer music; came the cry of the people.

And—came Zondat's men. More of them than last night. They crowded through the main entrance of the bubble, sat down, or leaned quietly against walls. Attracted by the music, compelled to attend that symphony.

The guards said nothing. They stood lifeless, but they were absorbing every drum beat, every harmonic; every volumi-

nous vibration which was so far below hearing that it impinged not on ear drums, but on bones and flesh and nerves.

I waited quietly for what I knew was to happen.

Zondat. He came bursting through the main bubble entrance, halted stock still, his glassy eyes reflecting an amazed ire. His mouth fell open, and suddenly I thought I could hear his irate screamings. He found the captain of the guards, brandished his arms in insane gestures. The captain of the guards towered over him, his dark face thin lippled. He shouted back.

Zondat breathed hard, talking excitedly, threateningly. He walked up and down, screaming at the guards, commanding them. They took his insults woodenly.

But nobody made a move to stop the Baimer music.

Zondat was left alone. He walked up and down, muttering. Finally he turned on his men. I could guess that he was ordering them to return to their posts. He ranted, swore, but his men listened to him with only half an ear. They were listening to the Baimer music.

Edith Dupré entered. She moved with easy stride to Zondat's side, and he screamed at her. I could see her lips forming cynical flippancies. But flippancies that had sense. For now Zondat turned, his head moving in quick bird-like motions as he studied the amazing, packed circle of Baimers. He began to walk softly up and down, nibbling at his lip. *He* was listening to the Baimer music!

I came to my feet, my heart beginning to hammer with slow-paced blows against my ribs. *Now?*

I saw Edith Dupré turning her head slowly in a semi-circle, her eyes searching. I caught her attention. I made unobtrusive gestures. Her breast rose quickly, her eyes widened in some sort of comprehension. I began slipping along the bubble-wall, toward the nearest exit from the bubble. There was a guard standing at that entrance-way, but he could not see me. He probably could have paid no attention to me if I had walked up to him. He was staring toward the source of the Baimer music. The music of the Baimers bathed him. His arms hung relaxed at his sides, there was on his unshaved,



characterless face the mute, unconscious worshipping expression one might find in a cathedral.

Up crashed the music of the Baimers. And down crashed my fist. The guard fell, rolled over. I dragged him to the side of the tunnel which gave exit to the bubble. He began to struggle. I bounced his head twice on the lava floor. He stopped struggling, and his head lolled. Perhaps I killed him. I would never know. I took his Hampton, his nerve-polarizer, and a holstered knife. He was a space-rat, dressed as a space-rat might dress, and yet his clothing was cleaner than mine. I put his cap on my head, traded my coat for his. I buckled the weapons around my waist. I shoveled rocks and lava and powdered lava over him and went.

The voice of the Baimer thousands funneled through the tunnel.

*"Play! Dance!"*

I was neither playing nor dancing. I was in earnest.

I MOVED SLOWLY into the next bubble, looked around its curving wall. Here and there were entrances into the Baimers' bubble. Zondat's men crowded those entrances. As I watched, another handful came loping toward the music. They wormed their way inside.

"Okay, Sidney," said a casual voice.

I whirled, and my Hampton was out. Edith Dupré laughed and stepped to my side. In her grey eyes was respect.

"Your reactions are good, Sidney. You thinking of getting out of this fire-trap?"

She took my arm, came close to me. I could feel her trembling. Her flaxen hair was just under my chin, touching it. At that moment, the world seemed to rock, tipsily. The earth-shock slammed us back against the tunnel wall. We waited, I with my heart in my mouth. The Baimer music had stopped!

I breathed hard. Came another earth-shock. There was a muttering of voices, the voices of Zondat's men.

Edith Dupré shrank against me. "Make them play again," she whispered. She was not talking to me. That was a prayer. A prayer, I think, that had an answer.

*"Play!"*

The music struggled upward, rose toward a new peak of thunderous concussion.

I turned my white face to Edith Dupré, and I was shaking. I took time out to put my arm around her, something I knew I could never regret. I drew her frightened face up to mine, kissed her, felt the trembling drain from her body as she pressed closer, responding. There is an intoxication in love's first kiss—an intoxication that may be the combination of sounds and odors and touchings and sights, all whirled together and held aloft by an emotion that tears the soul. Perhaps it goes even deeper than that. It does not matter now.

There were tears in her eyes when I took my lips away.

"We're a couple of tough eggs, Edith," I said huskily. "But I think that was the real thing."

She gulped. "I—I think it was, too, Sidney. I'm glad."

"Good." I smiled down at her. "We've got to keep our nerve up. How many of Zondat's men are listening to the music?"

"I think all of them. Except maybe a half dozen scattered here and there."

"Good," I repeated. "Let's go."

We went. Crossed the floor of that bubble, through a series of interlocking tunnels. Edith Dupré was guiding me. We heard footsteps, and without warning, two men burst into our line of sight.

Their ratty eyes hesitated a second on me, then switched to Edith. We stopped, unable to keep ourselves from tensing.

The men leered at Edith, then touched at their caps and went past us. We walked forward—two steps. Then I turned. My Hampton snapped out.

The man who had his weapon pointed at my back got it first. The explosive projectile tore his chest apart. The other man clawed at his hip, wildly. He fell where he stood, half his face blown away.

I took both Hamptons and gave one to Edith and pushed her ahead of me. She was weaving, and I snapped at her, commandingly. She steadied, fighting for control. In the space of a half minute, there had been a lot of blood scattered around.

Once more we found resistance. I tipped my hand deliberately, and the fellow tried to withdraw me. Just as my weapon spoke, the earth shook again. But it was minor. We ran over his body, went through two small bubbles and then into a large one,

one side of which was fashioned into a series of three-walled rooms. In the center room was the telepathic equipment I had seen from the tiny hole in the floor of the bubble above.

I started eagerly for the room. It was empty. Edith Dupré stopped me, pointed.

"Two guards down that way," she whispered. "At the entrance to the crater path. We'll have to get rid of them."

I hesitated, decided against it. "No," I snapped. "What if another earth tremor stops the music before we get finished?"

As if an answer to that, the floor of the bubble wobbled, sharply. And then again. Edith Dupré said faintly, "I've never felt a shock like that before. You think it's coming—now?"

"I don't know," I panted. I was sick with dread as I threw myself into the bucket-shaped chair before Zondat's telepathic equipment. I senselessly took the earphones from the rack, clapped them on my head. And Edith Dupré tore them off, in terror. I had forgotten her diagrams.

"The machine's on!" she cried. "Two records alternate, commanding the Baimers to submit to Zondat. You'd find yourself wanting to submit to Zondat."

I SWEATED. She opened a cabinet. Two records were there. One was spinning. When it stopped spinning, a trip lever would start the other. Edith Dupré lifted the needles from the records and with shaking hands fastened the two electrodes to my temples. She handed me a mouthpiece. I froze as if I had an audience of a million.

I didn't freeze long. Not when the third earth shock in three minutes rocked the machine on its bolted-down legs. I spoke to the Baimers:

*"Baimers! Cease playing your music. You are no longer under the control of Zondat. Turn on the human beings who hold you in thralldom. Destroy! Trample! Kill! Let none escape!"*

Short and to the point.

Behind me there was the cracking of a Hampton, the accompanying explosion. I whirled, saw Edith Dupré looking dully at a man lying face down, his position grotesque.

I repeated the telepathic command. Again. And again.

I added: *"Kill! Kill! Leave your possessions behind you. Find the way to the crater path. Kill the human beings. Kill!"*



*Find the way to the crater path. Quickly. Kill the human beings, all you see."*

My voice grew hoarse from talking. I thought I heard other voices, screaming voices. Imagination. This was fantasy. I thought I heard Edith Dupré's Hampton speak again. I didn't turn to look. Now, now or never, the Baimers must be turning on Zondat and his men. They must be killing them, paying no attention to their own lives. Senselessly, harking only to a command which came into their minds from nowhere, their great strength must be turned against their enslavers.

Now or never. For at that moment, the girl shook my arm, cried wildly, "Sidney! They're coming! I can hear their screams, their—oh!"

Her weapon spoke once, twice. And now I did hear voices, terrible screams of horror. I tore the electrodes from my head, whipped out both Hamptons. Three of Zondat's space-rats came running through the bubble, on their contorted faces a driving urgency. After them poured a flood of Baimers. They caught up with the three men, swarmed around them, dispersed and looked in our direction. They were blood-spattered.

There was enough in their expression to make Edith Dupré scream. And I remembered. "*Kill the human beings, all you see,*" I had told them.

We were human beings!

The Baimers forged their way toward us. And I acted purely with a reflex motion. I fired—not at the Baimers, but into the heart of Zondat's telepathic transmitter. Tiny whirring sounds in its interior died, tubes blinked out. The Baimers stopped, a hundred or two, faces bewildered.

I cried, pointing, "We are your friends! There is the crater path! Go!"

They went. And Edith and I started off after them, running to keep up with their stride, the sweat of a tremendous relief pouring down my face.

Behind us there was a splatter of gun fire. A Hampton projectile singed past my ear, struck the bubble wall, brought tons of debris down on top of the fleeing Baimers. I shouted, turned, firing my weapon as I did so. A giant seemed to strike my arm. My Hampton twisted itself from my grip. I frantically started to

draw the other, but a shrill voice blasted, "*I wouldn't, spaceman!*"

I froze. Zondat! Through the haze of lava dust, I saw him. He stood no more than ten feet away, his Hampton trained on us. He was shaking from head to foot, caught in the grip of lunatic rage. But his gun-hand was steady enough.

Near him stood Borge, the heavy-jawed scientist.

"You have ruined our plans, Edith," he said heavily.

"You will die, Edith," chattered Zondat. "You have betrayed me. My dreams of empire are finished. You shall—die!"

He fired, this time surely, with full control; at Edith.

Even Fate, I suppose, has alternatives to choose from. The *status quo* is the easier path to choose. I expected to die. I expected Edith to die. There wasn't much else that could happen.

Unless one remembered the tons of lava that had chipped from the ceiling of the bubble; unless one considered the not inconsiderable vibrations that mass of falling material set up in the porous territory around us. I can now guess that those vibrations were the straw that broke the camel's back. Otherwise, there is no explaining why the thin wall separating two volcanic fissures chose that moment to fracture. It did choose that moment, and the tempestuous fires of Hades broke from their confinement with full fury.

THE FLOOR bellied up around us, and the ceiling bulged down. I was tossed like a speck of dust, blown through a bellows. I hit. Blood washed my face. I screamed, rolled over, saw a figure staggering toward me. Zondat. I kicked out at him. Another figure came. Edith. I grabbed at her. She sagged. I shook her, yelling like a demented person. And began dragging her behind me, in circles. Then I followed a curving wall, through choking dust. I picked Edith up in my arms. She was limp, lifeless, and I sobbed.

There was a drumming, a coughing sound, like a man as big as a planet, spitting up his life blood. I looked behind me, and there was the most scarlet, fieriest mass of flame I had ever seen. It breathed at me hotly. It blew me before it. The earth rocked. Tunnels closed up behind

me like a constricting throat regurgitating unwanted food. I fell and seemed to roll up as well as down. Great flames of static electricity lighted my way, and I staggered down a broad tunnel that was like Broadway. Then I went up. And up. I burst forth into a great bubble that rocked back and forth as if it were a bulb in a swaying chandelier. It was filled with Baimers, screaming and blundering and going nowhere. I saw Oro Tarkid.

"Oro Tarkid!" I cried above the hell of sound and welter. "Bid your people follow me!"

Blank. Mental blank. I was carrying Edith. And I was moving up. And I was following somebody. Up ahead, I saw them—two figures. A slight figure and a heavier figure. I had been following them I know not how long. I did not dare rest. There were branching tunnels. This was a section of Zondat's disrupting empire that I had not seen. And that was Emperor Zondat ahead! Borge and Zondat!

In my arms a dead girl. Or she seemed dead. Edith Dupré, the roughest, toughest girl ever to wear the space-boots of a man. If so rough, and so tough, why didn't she walk? I put her on her feet, and cried out to her to walk, but she slumped against me. I shook her. Her eyes opened. To look into their suffering depths was to bring back sanity.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes, Sidney," she said.

ORO TARKID came behind us. Behind, two and three abreast where the tunnel was broadest came the hundreds of Baimers. I was Orpheus, I thought to myself; Orpheus, who had gone into Hades and with music had charmed all nature; had rescued his wife Eurydice and started for the upper world. But I would not look back into Hades as Orpheus had done, so losing his wife and his life both. The fancy stayed crazily in my mind, and I toiled mightily after the Bacchantes—after Zondat and Borge—for they knew the path to safety; yet also sought my life.

Slowly, Oro Tarkid and his tribespeople were catching up with us. I had a terror of being trampled and lost and brushed against the sides of the tunnel by those giant legs. I ran. I held Edith's hand. The tunnel turned, narrowed into a

throat; we edged through, raced ahead. Now and again the earth shook. Now and again blasts of super-heated air seemed likely to roast us. But I knew we were out of danger.

Edith cried, "Zondat!"

I whirled. He was above us, looking down the slope. And Borge with him. He surveyed the situation calmly. He had no weapons. Borge disappeared. The next thing we knew a rock as round as an egg and almost as broad as the tunnel crashed down the slope toward us. Madly, we hugged the wall. Another smaller one came and another. We evaded them. Zondat looked palely down at us. Borge rolled a larger boulder to the rim. He started to push it. Zondat had to help him. The boulder, too large for us to escape, trembled on the edge of the slope.

I put my arm around Edith. I was ready to die—too ready. For Borge, for an unexplainable reason, lurched to one side. To save his balance, his shoulder put its full weight against Zondat. Zondat yelled, clawed at empty air, and came tumbling down the slope. He crashed into me, full tilt. He rolled over, hurled himself full at me, put his hands around my neck and put on the pressure. My eyes started to come out.

"Sid!"

Will's voice!

On the ledge above us, I heard the sounds of a titanic struggle. My bulging eyes saw the boulder trembling. I saw Borge and Will Carrist, two heavy figures, at death grips on the lip of the slope. I saw Edith, bending over Zondat. I saw her arms come down. Zondat gasped, rolled over, released me. I leaped for him. Something shiny glinted in his hand. A knife. It sliced through the air at me, caught me in the chest, went deep.

I felt no pain. I caught Zondat's body in my hands, lifted him in the air, and bent him across my knee like a piece of kindling wood. His glittering eyes probed up into mine for one sane second. Then he screamed his protest, babbled for mercy, grabbed at the air. It didn't seem as if I pressed down. Not at all. But there was a snapping sound. Zondat, Master Magician, self-styled Emperor of Vulcan, expired—and I expired with him, across his dead body, staining him as red as the

volcanic fires which by this time had consumed his men. My life was flowing away through the hole in my chest, and I slumbered toward death. . . .

I DID NOT DIE, but of life I knew nothing for a week. Then I opened my eyes, and was looking up at the roof of a Baimer bark-tent. Sitting cross-legged near my sleeping-mat was that member of the Baimer tribunal who had grafted the telepathic nerve into my arm. My chest was bared, and he was touching at my wound with gentle fingers. I smelled a pungent ointment. The Baimer smiled gravely. I slept.

Will and Edith came.

Edith sat near me. She blinked rapidly. "You take a lot of killing, Sidney," she blurted out. She sniffed, and she looked angry at herself for breaking down.

Will's blunt fingers twined together. His voice was strained. "I guess you think I walked out on you, Sid. I didn't. I just thought it was about time for one of us to show some good sense. If the crater was going to erupt, what was going to happen to our ship? We'd be stuck here for years. . . . And I had another idea! Zondat must have had another means of getting up from underground. Remember when we first landed on the planet? It was level for hundreds of feet around us. Zondat and his men came out of nowhere! I figured there was a fissure or a tunnel nearby that led down to the bubbles. And I was right! I started down, and I ambushed eight different men. I killed them. I took their Hamptons and I walked for hours. Then I felt the air getting hot!"

He sweated as he told the story, his voice went tinny. "I knew the volcano had broken through! I ran. I almost ran into Borge and Zondat and I saw what they were doing. I knocked Borge away—then I had a fight on my hands."

"But Borge," said Edith, with a sigh, "is dead."

I dropped my hand to Will's knee. I had trouble meeting his eyes. But he understood, and squirmed uneasily.

"Anyway," he blurted, "most of the Baimers were saved. They're out there now, Sid, and you're a hero. A hero,

Sid! Oro Tarkid is out there. He's told the Baimers how you saved them. How you made them play the Baimer music—how you drew Zondat's space-rats to the bubble—so you could get to the transmitter—and how I blasted the narrow part of the escape tunnel with a Hampton so they could get through—"

"Listen!"

EDITH DUPRÉ raised her forefinger, on her lovely face a rapt glory. And I heard it. The sound of Baimer music.

The sound of a single plucked string.

*Yes, I thought to myself, age-old music. Even you, Oro Tarkid, do not know the truth. Even you do not know of the music that was designed by your forefathers to serve a purpose. Music that has been handed down through the generations, a necessary part of your lives on a planet that is ripped year in and year out by the ceaseless magnetic storms of a planet that is caught in the Sun's own magnetic field. Music, the curative. The mental healer. The soother of troubled nerves. Music, Oro Tarkid, hath charms to soothe the savage breast . . . they found that out on my planet centuries ago. Your music saved you, not I.*

Edith Dupré dropped to her knees beside me, and somehow we forgot Will. Anyway, he had forgotten us, for the Baimer music claimed him.

Tears came to her eyes. "Sidney," she gulped, "down there—underneath—when you—"

"I meant it," I said. I drew her closer, met her eyes simply. Her lip trembled. "I really meant it." I kissed her, almost; but she broke away.

"Sidney," she got out at last, through lumps in her throat, "I—I didn't even think I'd meet another really tough egg—like m-me. A guy who didn't have an ounce of s-sentiment. A g-guy who'd jump at the chance to throw his life down the drain just because somebody else was being stepped on."

I thought that over. I said grimly, "I guess you've met him. And I have too, Edith. Down with the oppressors—always. That's our motto, yours and mine." I pulled her toward me. That time she did not get away.

# Formula For Conquest

By JAMES R. ADAMS

**August Q. Twilken had a formula, Freebooter Tod Mulhane had a nose for adventure and Mon Pordo had an urge for interworld domination. When those three got together, hell had to explode — and did.**

Illustration by MURPHY

"I HAVE a formula," the little man said loudly.

I punched him ungently in the ribs and jerked my head toward the mangy crew whooping it up in the close confines of the ill-smelling Martian *musk-parlor*.

"Shh. Not so loud, guy," I whispered from the corner of my mouth. This bunch would slit your throat in a minute, if they knew you had something on you that would bring a credit or two. I don't know what your game is, but let's go in the back room where we can talk without startin' someone's ears to burnin'."

I wrapped my arm around the guy's shoulders and steered him toward the back room, singing and laughing, as though I had an overload of *Mees-musk* and was feeling a little bit happy.

I didn't know what had brought the little fellow to me. I'd never seen him before yet he seemed to know me and had made his way directly to the bar where I stood and addressed me by name. Anybody that knew that much about Tod Mulhane, soldier of fortune, needed looking into, and I was determined to give this mild-mannered, shrimp of a man a thorough going over.

I bolted the door behind us and seated myself at the table always kept there for various games of chance.

"Mousie" nervously assumed a seat and sat staring at me, his big, milky-blue eyes blinking nearsightedly and a withered, vein-covered hand tweaking incessantly at a bedraggled gray mustache.

"I'm Professor August Q. Twilken," he essayed. "I have a formula."

"And I'm Tod Mulhane, as you seem to know, and I have a couple of great big ears, open and waiting. What can I do for you, Twilken?"

Twilken's face suddenly became grim

and the milkiness left his eyes a moment, to disclose dancing, hard lights of determination.

"Nothing for me, Mr. Mulhane," he said slowly. "This is for the world! Yes, for three worlds!"

I nodded patiently, thinking maybe I had a nut on my hands.

"Of course, Twilken. And just what is it we're going to do for these worlds?"

"We're going to save them from the coming Interplanetary War!" Twilken said forcefully. "Here's the way things—er—stack up. We know Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus have their armies poised for a quick thrust at the Allied Worlds—Mars, Earth and Neptune. But, so far, they have hesitated, knowing both sides are pretty well matched in strength and fearing the assault might be drawn out in a long, destructive conflict that would gain them nothing. They won't wait forever, however, and, sooner or later, they'll find a weakness in the Allied Worlds' armor and strike with all the force at their command. Mr. Mulhane, the Allied Worlds *must* be the ones to break this deadlock. *We* must be the ones to gain an edge in strength and force them to disarm, or be destroyed by the ruthless machine of the brain behind their mad plot. But, I forget, you know all of this, Mr. Mulhane."

"Tod's the name," I said absently. "Yes, I know all about Xan VIII's scheme to defeat the Allied Worlds. So what? There's nothing I can do about it. Naturally, being a Martian, I am anxious to see the Allied Worlds win. But I can't see—"

"You're a Martian?" Twilken stared, aghast. "But—but you look like an Earthian!"

"I have many disguises," I smiled. "And many pseudonyms—among them being that of Tod Mulhane. A soldier of fortune such



as I must resort to numerous devices to elude his enemies. Incidentally, how did you know who I was and where to find me?"

"I have—uh—contacts," Twilken stammered. "But your disguise seems so realistic! I would swear you're an Earthian!"

"I put my entire being into a part. I would long since be dead if I were unconvincing in my characterizations. But we digress, Twilken. Come to the point."

"The point is this," Twilken recovered from his astonishment. "If we had the

support of one of the lesser planets, such as Venus, we could easily overthrow Xan's regime and bring a lasting peace to the System. But, at the time, the inhabitants of Venus are in a crude stage of evolution and are too stupid to be of much help. They have expressed their willingness to help, but their ignorance might well be a weight on our progress and turn the tide against us."

I shifted uneasily in my chair and glanced at the door.

"But supposing evolution could be



*Professor Twilken clubbed futilely at the Jovian's back.*

speeded up on Venus," Twilken continued. "Supposing the inhabitants could be developed as much in two months as would ordinarily take a thousand years. They would soon emerge to a state of intelligence as to be of immense value and aid to our cause. I have something that will do this very thing, Tod!"

I LEAPED from my chair and wrenched the door open, just about scaring Professor Twilken out of a year's growth.

A short, fat Jovian fell into the room and lay grinning up from the floor. His pink, shaggy-browed eyes searched our faces briefly, then he arose, bowing deeply.

"Gentlemen," he intoned. "I hope I am nod intruding. I was leaning wearily againsd dis door, half asleep, and den I suddenly find myself lying here on de floor!" He gestured at the bare planks and laughed, it sounded like a snake hissing. "Mosd clumsy of me!"

The Jovian's inability to pronounce the letter "T" made his speech sound like that of a Venusian gunman. I wondered how much he had overheard.

The Jovian bowed again, brushing dust from his gleaming, spun-metal tunic.

"I drused I have nod inconvenienced you gentlemen. I musd be more careful, in de fudure. I have a nasdy habid of falling asleep ad odder people's doors! Now, if you will excuse me . . ."

The Jovian slid through the door and lost himself in the hubbub beyond. I had a hunch we were going to have trouble from him. People just didn't go around 'falling asleep' against strange doors without a purpose.

Twilken had sat all this time, his milky eyes looking about for a hole to crawl in to and his hand clutched his breast, as thought about to have a heart attack.

"Is that your formula?" I indicated his tunic pocket.

"Yes! It must never fall into the hands of the Jovians, Tod. They could make fearful use of it! We must carry out my plan quickly, or that son-of—" Twilken clapped a hand over his mouth, to stifle the strong words he had been about to utter. "—that mad devil will warn his consorts and they'll be after us like hounds. In all fairness, Tod, you must know the Allied Worlds Council is not endorsing

my venture. The diplomatic relations between worlds are stretched to the breaking point, and, if the Jovian government thought the Council was supporting such a plan, they might strike immediately with devastating results to the morale of our people, for there are some who think we can't possibly stand against such an efficient organization as Xan's. That's why I need you. You have a fast ship; you have courage and the brains to carry out my course of action if I should fall by the wayside. Will you help me?"

I grinned and hitched up my pants, Earth-fashion.

"When do we start?"

WE WERE well out in the void, thundering toward Venus, when Twilken pointed excitedly at a small speck on the telescreen.

"That's a ship, Tod!" he yelled. "That blasted Jovian's following us!"

I poured more power to my craft and slammed down frantically on the meteor-shield stud—but it was too late. A great blast rocked the ship and girders groaned their protest as they buckled under the terrific pressure. A piece of flying metal smacked Twilken on the head and he sank to the floor, out cold.

I ran to the navigation room locker and snatched out a couple of spacesuits. I tugged and stuffed Twilken into one and barely made it into my own when the air began to hiss out through the torn plates.

We were caught up in the vacuum and whisked out into the dark, cold vastness, to float about like two corks in a millpond.

The Jovian ship, for such it proved to be, rushed in quickly and fastened a grappling-beam on our helpless figures. In less than a minute, we were inside the cruiser and facing the leering Jovian of the *musk-parlor* incident.

"I am mosd pleased ad dis oppordunidy do renew our acquaintance," he smirked. "No doubd you know whad I am after? I shall wasde no dime in playing cad and mouse. Give me de formula and dere shall be no drouble."

Twilken came to long enough to shout: "You shan't have it!"

"Bud I will," the Jovian assured him. "I have bud do search you. I am cerdain we shall find de formula on your person."

Will you surrender id volundarily or musd we use force?"

"Give it to him, Augie," I said. "We're cold turkey."

"Misdur Mulhane is quide correcd," the Jovian agreed. "You have no aldernadive bud do relinquish your secrod."

**T**WILKEN groaned despairingly and removed his bulger. He dug in his pocket and brought out the formula, somewhat the worse for wear.

The Jovian snatched it eagerly and beamed toothily at us, his thin, pointed tongue darting like a snake over his bloated lips.

"Dank you, Misdur Dwilken. Never fear, I shall make good use of your formula. Would you care do know how I indend do defead de Allied Worlds wid id?"

We remained silent.

"Very well, I shall dell you. Just as you have a podential ally in Venus, de inhabidands of Pludo are likewise sympadedic to *our* cause. As you know, dey long ago reached and passed de poind of greed-ess indelligence, and are slowly reverding do de savage sdage from which dey evolved. I propose do hald dis redrogresion, wid de assidance of Misdur Dwilken's formula, and resdore dem do deir former greedness. Dey will be dankful do us Jovians, yes, and dey will be happy do assid us in our conquest of de Allied Worlds."

"You—you fiend!" Augie spluttered ineffectually. "You're going to use *my* formula to swing the balance of power in your favor!"

"Dad's righd," the Jovian bowed. "Is nod dis de very same ding you indended to do for your own worlds? Durn about is fair play, I once heard on Eard."

"But we weren't planning to destroy you and your crummy bunch with it!" Augie shouted, incensed at the Jovian's condescending air. "We were only going to use it to force your armies to disarm and to remove your cutthroat clique from power."

"No doubd," the Jovian waved a plump, bejewelled hand. "And dad musd never be. Xan VIII has udmosd confidence in my abildy as chief of de Jovian Secrod Police and, if I fail, he would surely kill me

before rediring indo exile. I remember his exacd words: 'Mon Pordo, if you bedray de drusd placed in you, dere can be nodding bud dead as a reward!' You can readily appreciate my predicamend, gentlemen. I musd give vicrody do my governmend or perish as a resuld. Nadurally, when I overheard your conversashion ad de musk-parlor, I realized dad here was a means do an end."

"You're a sly devil, Mon Pordo," I said harshshly.

"Dank you, Misdur Mulhane. Dad is a necessary evil of my—ah—profession. Dis ship has sed a course for Jupiter and, dere, you will be held prisoners, pending de oudcome of our experimends wid Dwilken's formula."

"And then you'll kill us!" Augie said hotly.

"Perhaps, Dad is for me do decide. You certainly have no choice in de madder. And now," Pordo indicated three hulking Jovian brutes, waiting to pounce on us, "dese gentlemen will escord you do your cells. Id is regredable I cannot allow you de run of de ship, bud de oppordunidies dus offered might prove doo dempting do resid. I advise you do go quiedly, gentlemen."

We went quietly.

We were placed in adjoining cells and Twilken spent his rage in rattling the bars and cursing Mon Pordo for a bloody, ill-spawned, war-mongering idiot. The Jovians paid no attention, however, and Augie soon simmered down to a slow boil, pacing his cage like a trapped animal.

We got to talking and Augie wanted to know all about me, why I had chosen such a career and did I have any immediate plans for escape?

At first, I was reluctant to talk about my life-history as a free-booter of space, but Augie was persistent and I soon broke down. I hardy knew how to start, but the words came easy once I got going. Augie listened attentively, interjecting questions here and there.

"I *am* a Martian," I began. "But I was reared and educated on Earth and, consequently, I think, act and talk much as an Earthian. I suppose that's the main reason I most generally adopt the role of Tod Mulhane when hiring out my services. My real name doesn't matter—it

wouldn't mean anything to you. As to why I became a soldier of fortune, perhaps it's because of an insatiable appetite for adventure I possess or maybe because I was left an orphan at an early age and just naturally drifted into it. That doesn't matter either. I've put a lot of space behind my tubes in my brief span of years and seen a lot of things that would make your blood run cold—things I've never talked of before, nor will I tell of them now. So you can sketch in the details yourself, if you care to. I've told all that's worth listening to."

**W**E HAD BEEN conversing in low whispers and Augie glanced up and down the corridor to make sure no guards were present before voicing his most imperative query.

"Most interesting," he approved. "But, surely you have a method of escape planned? We can't just sit here and let these devils go through with their mad deed."

I motioned for silence and Augie subsided, watching my antics with great interest. I placed my hand between two bars and pulled gently, with an even pressure. My companion stared bug-eyed as the hand came loose, exposing a pink tentacle ending in five, wire-thin appendages.

Augie gasped, suddenly remembering his Martian anatomy.

"Of course!" he breathed jubilantly. "I'd forgotten! If Pordo had realized you were a Martian he would never have placed you in an uninsulated cell!"

I laughed.

"We're not going to escape yet, though," I said softly. "It would do no good. Pordo would merely recapture us and lock us away in the insulated cargo-hold. We wouldn't have a chance then."

"What do you plan to do, then?" Augie asked perplexedly.

"We'll let them think we're helpless," I explained. "They'll go ahead with their scheme and, at the crucial moment, we'll step in and queer the works." I replaced the false hand.

"How?" Augie wanted to know.

"That," I said, "remains to be seen."

\* \* \*

The pilot brought the cruiser in for a perfect landing and the unceasing throb

of the rockets sputtered, died and gave way to a loud silence.

Mon Pordo came down the passageway, flanked on each side by a stony-faced guard. His cruel lips parted in a wide grin as he unlocked our cells and motioned us out.

"We have arrived, gentlemen," he hissed. "I am pleased to note you have made no effort to escape. We shall proceed immediately to the governmental palace where you will be interned in the underground prison-block. You will accompany these men who will lead you to your quarters."

The musclemen hustled us from the ship and into a waiting surface-car. I had refitted the false hand, fusing the ends of the plastic together with a quick jolt of electricity. The stupid guards didn't suspect anything as we roared from the Jove City Spaceport, headed for the luxurious palace which housed the high officials of Jovian government. I could have burnt them to a crisp where they sat, but Twilken was to one side of me and he would be the first to get it. I decided other avenues of action would present themselves in due time, so I relaxed against the cushions and stared casually out the window, mentally mapping the route we were following, to use as reference in our coming escape. Twilken sat dejectedly, his milky eyes playing tag with a small insect beating frantically against the window. I felt a strange kinship for this mild little man. He was so darn concerned over our plight; so terribly anxious to regain the formula he had labored long and hard to perfect. I wasn't so worried about our present unfavorable circumstances as he—having built up an immunity to such misfortunes in my past escapades. Nevertheless, my brain was working overtime—seeking a way to circumvent the Jovian plot once we had escaped.

We braked to a halt in the palace courtyard and the two ugly Jovians prodded us toward a massive, solid-steel door. The damp, moss-covered tunnel through which we passed ran deep under the palace and row after row of tiny, unlighted cells lined each side. Many of them were occupied, and I didn't care to look twice at the wild-eyed, disease-wracked bodies of Xan's victims. There was a hopeless look on those

hollow-cheeked faces; a blank, "why go on fighting?" stare in the eyes of the more sane—the ones who hadn't been there very long yet. The cells were wet and filthy-littered and the suffocating stench of the place was so dense you could almost see it.

We were more fortunate in the matter of living conditions. The cell in which we were placed was large, tolerably dry and was supplied with a couple of candles for illumination. Still, the unrelenting smell and the tortured moans of the prisoners was enough to drive a man mad.

"Pordo wands do keep you alive awhile," one of the guards explained, referring to the clean cell. "If dis formula doesn't show results, id's going do be doo bad for you fellows! Pordo don'd like do be dampened wid, so, if all dis is juld a drick—look oud!"

The Jovian slammed the door to and the pair went off down the tunnel, echoes of their laughter rolling back to bounce gleefully through the cells, plucking one more anguished groan from the lips of the half-dead men within.

The old-fashioned wax candles were relics of a long-gone day and age, manufactured solely for ornamentation. But some scientist had whiled away a few idle hours by adding a couple of new features.

AUGIE removed the cap from the wick of one and it burst into a brilliant, unflickering flame. Even it was far superior to the crude electric lighting of the ancients.

"What now?" Augie asked.

"We wait," I said. "This cell isn't too uncomfortable and we can bide our time here; play the game Pordo's way and lull him into a sense of invulnerability. Things may come to a head sooner than you think, and you can bet we'll be in there fighting at the end."

Augie's eyes flamed and his face screwed into a mask of hate.

"I despise that tyrant Pordo!" he breathed soulfully. "D-damn him, if I may use such a vulgar term."

I glanced about the cell and located a musty, well-worn cot. It was the only one the room contained, so it was the floor for one of us. Night must be spreading its black cloak across the world outside and we were both dead-tired.

"We'll flip a coin for the bed," I said. "Then we'll alternate in its use for as many nights as we're here."

Augie chose heads and flipped the coin. It came up tails.

"D-damn," he reiterated. "Seems my luck has flown the coop for good!"

He crossed the room and snapped the cap down over the candlewick. Darkness rushed in, probing inky fingers under the cot and in crevices, eager to strangle any loitering mote of its fleeing enemy.

Pordo visited us the next day, anxious to let us know how he was progressing. He bowed his silly, condescending bow.

"I drust you have slepd well, gentlemen. I am indeed sorry dere are no bedder quarders available, bud de choice rooms of de palace are quide well-filled wid de visiding diplomads of our allies. Incidentally, de Pludonians have also arrived for de experiment!"

"You mean you're going to conduct the experiment right here on Jupiter?" Augie exclaimed, wide-eyed.

"Dad is precisely whad I mean!" the Jovian bit out. "Do you object?"

Augie was too confused to offer a reply. He just stood staring at Pordo, tiny beads of sweat popping out on his forehead.

"You will ask why," Pordo divined. "And I can see no danger in delling you. We have god do desd de formula frisd on a selected few individuals from Pludo. Accordingly, de dwendy-five mosd highly advanced indelledcs of Pludo have been broughtd here do de palace and will undergo de speeded up evolushun process. In dis way, we may make advance condaed wid de enlighdened Pludonians, before evolving de masses, and make a pacd wid dem, pledging deir planed's aid in our project. Den, de millions of odgers will receive de dreadmend and we will be ready do acd! We are nod doo sdupid do realize de evolved creadures mighd possess animosidy doward our purpose. Dus, in our frisd experiment, we are evolving no more dan can be easily eliminaded, should dey prove hosdile. De formula is even now being prepared and will be applied immediadely. According do Misder Dwilken's dada, de process should be complede in dwo monds, ad de mosd. Id is pleasand to condemplade, isn'd id, gentlemen?"

"It will never work!" Augie shrieked.

"Your plan is utterly mad!"

"Id bedder work," Pordo said significantly, "or I'm afraid I shall be forced. do adminisder drasdic punishment do dose who have dus wased my dime. Good-day, gentlemen!"

We watched the receding figures through the bars and, when Pordo was out of sight, Augie said through grim lips:

"I don't like it, Tod. He's hitting into something he can't handle!"

The fifth day of our confinement, Augie did something that almost put the fat in the fire.

A guard brought our food and water each day and would dawdle awhile in the cell, heaping salt on our wounds by informing us of how well the experiment was going forward. This day he was exceptionally boastful and Augie was feeling particularly testy about the whole thing.

The Jovian had explained in much detail how you could actually *see* the Plutonians evolving as the formula took effect. His eyes bugged in awe as he told how the skin and flesh stretched and twisted on the skeletons, forming itself into new substance.

As he turned to leave, smug in the knowledge he had paved the way for a sleepless night, Augie jumped from the cot and hissed after him:

"Mismu T!"

**T**HE GUARD whirled, eyes blazing. The Jovians were extremely sensitive about their vocal defect that made forming of the letter "T" physically impossible. Augie's hot expletive was the equivalent of telling Pordo's underling he was too dumb to pronounce the sound.

The enraged dupe leaped at Augie, snarling fiercely. The two went down in a tangle flying arms and legs, the Jovian pouring sledgehammer blows into Augie's midriff—blows that were meant to kill. He wore no gun, or he would have used it. The Jovians were giving us no opportunity at escape.

I jumped into the fray, knowing if I didn't intercede in Augie's behalf the guard would maul him into a bloody pulp.

The Jovian turned on me and closed in, fists flailing and teeth gritting in fury at my interruption. I sidestepped his wild

body punch and heard bone crunch as I caught his chin on a well-timed uppercut. The guard screamed, blood dripping from his torn lips and Augie came in triumphantly from behind, raining mincey, bird-like blows on his head.

It didn't last long. The other guards, attracted by the clamorous uproar, came on the run and quickly subdued us with clubbed flame-pistols. Our badly-beaten opponent was dragged from the room, uttering garbled, vengeful threats, and we were left to lick our wounds.

"You shouldn't have done that," I mildly reproached Augie.

"I was mad." He thrust out a stubborn chin. "They're stirring up a hornet's nest, Tod, and I won't be responsible for what happens! My formula was meant to be used on the native worlds of the subjects and there's no telling what kind of monstrosities they may evolve by not following the natural laws embodied in it. The resultant organisms may be intelligent, yes, but—"

Augie broke off, tenderly fingering a swollen eye and munching thoughtfully on his lower lip. He was sure down in the dumps all right, and I couldn't blame him. We were in a hell of a mess, putting it mildly. Three worlds to save, and we couldn't even save ourselves!

We spent two full months in the dungeon. I fretted away the last thirty nights on the floor, since contact with the cold stone had goaded Augie's rheumatism into full-flare.

News leaked in now and then and, on the sixty-second day, our guard disclosed the experiment had been completed and the high officials of Jupiter and its cohorts would meet that very day with the evolved Plutonians in the Grand Assembly Hall of the palace to form a pact that would seal the fate of the Allied Worlds.

"Now is the time, Augie!" I whispered excitedly.

Augie was electrified into action. He backed off in a corner and pulled the cot down over him. There would be tremendous heat.

I placed one hand under a foot and heaved up. The false hand remained on the floor, leaving my prehensile tentacle free to act.

I strode to the door and glanced up



and down the tunnel. No guards were present—they were probably outside discussing the conference, which was now in progress.

I twined my "fingers" about a thick, steel bar and gave it all the juice I had! The metal glowed red-hot slowly fading into an incandescent white! The stuff began to melt, flowing out into the tunnel and forming bubbling puddles at my feet. The door didn't last long; all that was left was the cooling pools of metal and a gaping frame that yawned invitingly! The way was clear!

"Willing to take a chance?" I asked.

Augie gulped and nodded weakly.

I boosted him to my back and made a sudden dash through the hissing, liquid steel, taking care not to slip. I wasn't afraid for myself, I'm non-conductive to heat. But Augie, perched precariously on my back, would certainly be engulfed and devoured by the stuff if I should fall.

**T**HEN we were through the molten hell, making our way cautiously down the passageway. Pitiful moans assailed our ears; frenzied pleas for us to release the sufferers inside welled forth from the dark cells. But I was adamant.

"Time enough for that later, if we're successful," I said to Augie. "These half-dead creatures would only be in our way in the coming fight."

We reached the outer door and I pulled tentatively on the handle. It was unlocked! Apparently, the guards thought the thick cell-doors were enough protection against escape and hadn't bothered to fasten this one. Anyway, they would return soon.

"You wait here," I whispered to Augie. "They're probably outside the door and would raise a hell of a noise if we came rushing out fighting. I may be forced to use a little persuasion on them."

I opened the door and stepped casually outside. The guards were huddled in a circle not ten feet from me, absorbed in an abstract debate on what would arise from the palace conference. One of them spotted me and let out a squeal.

"L-look!" he stammered. "One of de prisoners is loose!"

They marshalled their forces and advanced on me slowly, quietly, seeing no

reason to summon aid. There were five of them—I was but one.

They made a concerted rush and clamped eager hands on my arms. Mon Pordo and Xan would reward them liberally for thwarting such an ill-planned coup. It was so easy, too.

I placed my exposed tentacle on the shoulder of one and let go with a few thousand volts!

The Jovians were packed together tightly and the electric charge dispatched them with grim ease. There was nothing left but a sickening mass of blackened, cooked flesh.

Augie poked his head through the door and gagged wretchedly at the charnel sight.

"It was necessary," I said.

We stuffed the charred bodies inside the tunnel door and fled swiftly across the courtyard to the palace-proper where I pointed to a high window. Vines ran rampant on the wall. It would be an easy matter to climb up them to the window.

We started up, gaining footing in small cracks between stones and going hand over hand toward the opening. Augie looked down once, and turned a pale green. From then on, he kept his eyes fastened to our objective.

I reached the window first and held out a hand to Augie. I pulled him through and we stood looking about. We were on a huge balcony, overlooking the brilliantly lighted Grand Assembly Hall. The most eminent political figures of three planets were there below us.

Here was Taj Morkus and Klex II of Saturn. There was Wen Dorn and the intellectual, if perverted, scientist, Haljin from Uranus.

The wily Mon Pordo was all about the Hall, like a fretful hen, bowing and shaking hands and directing the villainous delegates to seats at the council table.

At the head of the table sat Xan VIII himself, adorned from head to foot with rare, exotic jewels, watching the redundant proceedings from bored, seemingly-sleepy eyes.

There were more, many more, but those six were the main cogs of the machine. I counted exactly one hundred figures

seated around the table, and some of them were strange beings indeed. . . .

I knew immediately these were the evolved Plutonians. There were twenty-five of them, ranged along one side of the immense table, fidgeting uncomfortably under the concentrated attention of their hosts. There was something odd about those creatures, although I couldn't say just what. Certainly their color was strange; a sick, yellowish-white—but that wasn't what bothered me. I could tell by their actions they were rational, thinking beings. It was something about their "flesh" that had me going. Augie solved the problem with his next words.

"My lord!" he whispered loudly. "Those creatures are composed almost entirely of an impure form of calcium carbonate! I thought something like this would happen! Away from the native world, the Plutonian process of evolution was torn between its natural tendencies and the contradictory characteristics of its new environment. This is the result!"

It was then I knew what we must do. We went over the plan hurriedly, yet making sure there were no flaws. Down below, Mon Pordo was beginning a speech. He stood at the table importantly, white teeth flashing against the purple background of his corpulent lips.

"Gentlemen," he began blandly, as if that was the only form of address he knew. "I have de unequalled honor of presending do you a mosd marvelous revelashon. I have de privilege of making known do you dad which lhas been kep'd secred from your eyes; dad which we have often hindid ad in the pasd dwo monds, bud have nod yed divulged. Once I have mad dis gread disclosure, you will realize vicrody is widin our grasp—just as our enemies will realize furdur resisdance is endirely fudile and will abandon deir idealisdic cause. I—"

HE RAMBLED on like that for half an hour, finally getting around to introducing the Plutonians. Things moved more swiftly then. The Plutonians were just the least bit reluctant to form an allegiance and the experienced diplomats argued, pleaded, thrust and parried and generally browbeat them into a decision. The confident delegates finally withdrew

to other parts of the palace to give the beleaguered Plutonians a chance to think it over in private. This was what I had been counting on, and we took quick advantage of the situation.

Augie scurried back through the window and clung to the vines outside, to be a safe distance away from what was to come. An hour, the diplomats had said. We would make good use of those sixty minutes. I leaped to the balcony-rail and plummeted down in the center of the Hall.

The Plutonians didn't have time to get out so much as a peep. I had divested myself of both false arms and, even in mid-air, I released a killing charge of electricity that left the duped creatures slumped in their chairs—lifeless hulks. If the armed Mon Pordo had been there, things would probably have been different. The Jovians were quick-eyed and quick-acting and he would have blasted me to pieces with his ato-matic the minute I appeared on the balcony-rail. That's why I couldn't risk it before. I didn't want Augie facing the devils alone.

I spent quite a little time in the Hall, standing in the center of the table and sending out wave after wave of electricity over the dead Plutonians—doing things to their bodies.

Finally satisfied I had accomplished my purpose, I arranged the beings in life-like poses along the table and moved silently to a spot beneath the balcony-rail.

Augie had succeeded in tearing one of the tough vines loose from the palace wall and now he lowered it to me, keeping a wary eye on the Hall door.

Going quickly up the thin fiber strand, I stepped jubilantly over the rail—and found myself looking directly into the venom-filled eyes of Mon Pordo!

He was standing in back of Augie, a little to one side, so the deadly ato-matic held unwaveringly in his hand could cover us both.

The frozen surprise on my face caused Augie to turn and stare sickly. All the heart seemed to go out of him at that moment. His shoulders slumped wearily and the hard lines of determination in his face dissolved into a black pool of despair beneath the caustic solvent of a big, unashamed tear. We were beaten!

For once, Pordo was so infuriated he forgot all about bowing. His eyes smoldered like blobs of hot grease, about to burst into flame; frenzied, unholy hate seemed to ooze from every pore. Even so, he spoke quietly.

"A nead plan, gentlemen. Bud id has failed, juld as all plods againsd Xan VIII will fail! Drue, you have given us a demporary sed-back by killing de Pludonians, bud we sdill have de formula and dere are odders who, dough nod as indel-ligend, will well serve our purpose. Id is doo bad I decided do visid you during de recess, isn'd id? Odderwise, your rash acd may have succeeded! When I found you gone and your guards dead, I knew insdantly whad you were up do and came here as de logical poind for you do sdrike from. I am sorry, gentlemen, bud you are doo dangerous do be allowed do live. So, I musd eliminade you!" Pordo raised he gun and his finger tightened on the firing stud.

This was it! I couldn't blast Pordo with an electric shock without killing Augie, too. Good-bye, "Tod Mulhane"—you've had a short but interesting life! I steeled myself for the atomic capsule that would soon rip through my body.

Augie acted almost impulsively. He still held the fibrous vine in his hand and had noted slyly one of Pordo's feet enmeshed in the extending end. He lunged suddenly backward and Pordo came down hard on the balcony floor!

**I**NSTANTLY we were on him; clawing, punching—making a desperate bid for the ato-matic. Pordo tried to scream and Augie planted a solid kick in his belly. The Jovian suddenly decided he didn't want to scream; maybe because there wasn't any air left in him to yell with.

I whipped a tentacle about the fat throat and began tightening my muscles, ruthlessly. Pordo's eyes bugged hideously and the wind whistled through his teeth in a vain effort to enter his lungs.

Sure, we were two on one, but fair play didn't enter the picture. We were fighting to save three worlds, and Xan and his henchmen had used the same tactics in their blood-drenched rise to power. This was a case of 'Durn about *is* fair play,' as Pordo would say.

Right now, he wasn't saying *anything*. The fat body had gone limp in my grasp and Pordo's evil soul was probably this minute bowing at the gates of hell and saying, "Gentlemen!"

"They'll be returning any minute!" Augie panted anxiously. "We've got to work fast!"

I handed him a small chunk of stuff I'd gouged from the body of a dead Plutonian and retired to my place at the balcony rail.

Augie took the stuff gingerly and placed it on the flat, upturned butt of Pordo's ato-matic. He crossed the slanting balcony to a point where the ceiling almost met the floor and waited there breathlessly.

A network of pipes ran across that ceiling. Pipes that contained water. This part of the palace was much the same as it had been many years ago, when the first Jovian dictator had met with his underlings here in the Assembly Hall and formed the policies of government that had laid the groundwork for eventual System domination. The Jovians entertained a sentimental attachment to this outmoded room and wouldn't think of modernizing it, except for inconsequential details such as lighting. Even the ancient, automatic sprinkler system remained. Originally used to combat fire, it was now nothing but an ornament; a relic of bygone days. The Jovians didn't need it now; scattered about the room were dozens of the recently invented *Kelecyrine-capsules*, one of which could extinguish the most persistent of flames. But I was staking everything on the hope the sprinkler was still connected to a water pump.

The diplomats were reentering the room! They moved forward confidently—unrealizing of the fact the Plutonians were dead. Xan led the procession, his gigantic belly bouncing up and down in rhythm to his pompous steps.

Now! I waved my hand frantically at Augie. He snapped to sudden life. A stream of saliva squirted from his lips and impaled the stuff on the gun butt. It literally exploded into flames! Fingers of fire danced around the gun butt, questing hungrily for something to absorb.

Augie supplied that something. He moved the gun up under a rusty sprinkler pipe and held it there. Luckily, he had

had the foresight to empty the gun's atomic capsules and wrap a torn piece of cloth about his hand.

The Assembly Hall was big and the men below were walking slowly. Augie's torch had ample time to heat the pipes before the group reached the table.

Xan was getting suspicious. The unmoving forms of the Plutonians had him puzzled. They ought to at least have the courtesy to rise from their chairs to acknowledge his august presence.

At that moment, one of the dead beings tumbled from his seat, breaking into a million pieces as he hit the floor. Xan yelped alarmedly and rushed forward—just as the sprinkler pipes opened up and gushed forth a thick sheet of water; drenching the whole assemblage!

THINGS began to happen then! A tremendous *whoom!* shook the room and a canopy of flame flashed out from the table! In a trice, the Hall was a blazing holocaust. Scream after scream tore from the throats of the victims as the roaring inferno gulped them in and fiery teeth gnawed the flesh from their bones. There wasn't a chance of one of them reaching a *Kelecyrine-capsule!*

We raced to the window and tumbled down the vines. I had the location of the space-port well fixed in my mind, although it didn't matter much now if we were captured. The plot had been foiled!

"We have the, Plutonians to thank for our success!" Augie yelled, pounding across the courtyard.

He was right. Calcium carbonate had been almost the sole constituent of the Plutonians. There were other elements, yes, but in a far less degree. Using electricity for heat, I had simply converted that impure carbonate into a crude form of calcium oxide! It was crumbly stuff, but it had stuck together long enough to deceive the conspirators into thinking

everything was shipshape in the Assembly Hall. When those sprinkler pipes let go with their load of water, well . . . any high school boy can tell you what happened.

"What about those devils in the dungeon, Tod?" Augie had to shout to make himself heard above the turmoil. Guards were running for the palace, intent on saving their ruler; screaming court-ladies were dropping from windows, enveloped in clouds of dense, black smoke. I knew the *Kelecyrine-capsules* had long since burst and put out the flames, but not before they had done their grisly job.

"They'll be released when the Jovians find their government has collapsed about them!" I flung back. "We've got to get away from here before these people come out of their daze!" That sounds cowardly, but, to me, it was prudence.

We found a surface-car and sped for the Jove City Space-port. It was deserted. Everybody had been drawn to the palace by the frantic emergency calls of the Jovian Secret Police. We scrambled in a small, private cruiser and were soon far out in space, making for Earth.

"In a way, I'm glad the formula was lost," Augie said reflectively. "I can't reconstruct it from memory, you know. Too complicated. I don't think I would, anyway, seeing what havoc it can cause."

I nodded, setting the automatic control and relaxing in the bucket seat. "Tod Mulhane" had pulled through one more scrape.

"Too," Augie continued, "there would be no need of it now. Our enemies will be practically helpless now their leaders are dead, and we can easily force them to capitulate. The Jovians and their allies should welcome a democratic government after so many years of tyranny. Incidentally, Tod, where do you go from here?"

I grinned at Augie and lit a *Tobac-tube*. "I haven't any plans, Augie, but you can bet I'll not sit home knitting!"

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# BUY WAR BONDS



## THE VIZIGRAPH

This, dear Vizifans, is the twenty-fourth issue of *PLANET STORIES*, and we think it's a lulu. It's crammed full of hours of entertainment, and the authors range from oldtimers to first-timers. We've had quite a lot of fun in putting it together, and would like to have your reactions, via a letter, the moment you've finished the book. Write what you wish, double-spacing on one side of page only, with a two page limit; and the most interesting will be published in this department.

Some of our latest missives are reproduced here. Go on, kick 'em around, agree with them, or ignore them and write what you will. Girls or boys, women or men, all are welcome here, and the only taboos lie in good taste.

And how are your bond purchases coming? Still in there pitching? Those service men and women aren't slackers; why should you be just because you wear no uniform? This is everybody's war; it isn't won; and a bond bought today does double duty. It helps build a safe future for yourself—and it puts weapons in the fighters' hands. Lending your money to the greatest country on Earth is a small thing to ask of you; you get it back with interest! A bond is a bazooka; help blow the hell out of those Nazis and Nips.

Back to our book, if these three winners will drop a card, indicating their choices from the Spring Issue, their pics will be mailed to them pronto.

1. Al Weinstein 2. Frank Wilimczyk, Jr. 3. Tom Pace  
But enough of that. Let's take a look at a—

### RESENTFUL SARGE!

DEAR EDITOR:

Regional Hospital  
Fort Ord, Calif.

Because hospital facilities do not include typewriters, you will either have to decipher this note or drop it in the waste basket as trash. It is this hospital business that causes this anyway. After a month of lying in bed, one gets to the point where he will read anything. Therefore: my recent experience with *PLANET STORIES*.

If it is your policy to turn occasional readers into regular fans, I'm afraid you are falling down somewhere. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those prejudiced minds who decide how the soup tastes by merely peeping into the pot. I am, in truth, fond of the unusual and bizarre; I think your whole idea is good. But—and here is where the rub comes in—my perhaps overemphasized ego resents certain things. These I will try to give intelligently.

My first impression upon completing the magazine that you were fostering off on me some ten stories, all the work of a single hand and only slightly disguised by "by lines" and term changes. On second thought I realized I was wrong.

But why did I ever get the idea in the first place? Well, the subject matter for one thing. For instance, in the majority of



the stories an important point hangs on the ability of one mind to communicate with another apparently by mental waves. In one of the stories a fairly plausible manner of thought transmission is offered (*Colony of the Unfit*). One character explains that by use of a certain machine thought waves were registered by or as pictures. Not at all illogical as far as it goes. I rather doubt that all ideas produce pictures, however, and if so would it always be possible to correctly interpret them. I make this statement in view of the fact individuals react differently to a given stimulus. Yet this was the most logical explanation.

As for direct transfer of thought from brain to brain, tell me, please, what would the thoughts of a Chinese mean to you? Students of languages consider themselves very good if they can think in one language other than their own. Wouldn't it be better if your authors simply let their characters communicate in some universal language? It would be far simpler to explain how the strange invader from Wherezit learned it than the use of an overworked device which puzzles everyone.

Another thing which puzzled me—the terms used. Even the simplest items have strange and meaningless names. Since many of these “things to come” have no advantage over present day equipment, why use them at all? Why clutter up a story with strange-sounding guns, rockets and other death-dealing instruments unless they improve or make more efficient? For example (*The Hairy Ones*) the *ati* gun or whatever it was the hero was using apparently wasn't any more fatal than a Colt .45.

Granting that a thousand years will bring about many changes that the authors must imagine, I suggest the authors get together and standardize some of the most frequently used terms. Or as an alternative publish at the beginning of each story a glossary of all terms contained within the story that are not fully explained in that story. I don't mind meeting new and strange things, but I hate to stumble around in the dark. I will admit that such a step would handicap the authors in that they could no longer extract their charges from a difficult situation by carelessly slinging in some newly manufactured word and leaving their readers wondering how it happened.

Finally let us not subjugate plot for action. Action, I will admit, is essential. Still, a pile of mangled nameless horrors is not sufficient reason for a 3,500 word manuscript.

One other thing: in reading that departmental ditty “The Vizigraph” your devotees keep using the word “stfantasy” and the abbreviation “STF” Would you have someone kindly explain.

Summing up: this letter is no beef. It is intended as constructive comment, but if anyone takes exception I'm willing to go into the matter for all it's worth. As a final question, “Do you pay your hacks by the word or week?” I am inclined to believe the latter.

So having completed this spasm, I shall lie back, pull the covers up about my chin, and dream of future encounters with strange horrors of strange worlds.

Yours,

SGT. M. P. ADAMS.

## HELPFUL ED!

DEAR SERGEANT:

Welcome to our midst. Your letter was a good one, the kind we like, but we think it might be best to explain a few points you brought up.

Telepathy, by mind alone, or with the aid of machines, is being accepted more and more as a fact, as the study of the mind increases. We like to think the future-men will speak with their thoughts, thus bridging greater distances.

It would not be easy for one being to interpret the “thought pictures” of another if they concerned beliefs or conceptions; but true pictures of places or events or realities could be caught and understood. Individuals react differently, but not as to the basic shape, for example, of a boat.

A Chinese could speak mentally to an Eskimo, for thoughts are basic and would be translated in the receiver's mind into his tongue. Students of language think, as in Spanish, of the word patterns as they speak; but their true thoughts have no language limitations. Remember a language is an artificial means of expressing thought patterns—while, in reality, all thinking is a universal “tongue.”

As to the terms used. Languages change, expressions change. A gun is a gun, merely being an instrument for hurling a deadly charge (sic). A .45 is no more fatal than an arquebus or a blunderbuss, nor no more fatal than a disgun will be in the future. But new names are tagged on new inventions; therefore future weapons, rockets and the like will have new names. As to the glossary: if you read a story of surgery, would you expect a glossary of the medical terms used in connection with a diagnosis, treatment, or the operative technique? Such a thing would spoil the yarn, for, unless the story is written for a highly technical publication, the average story is not too technical in treatment.

As to plotting: that is more a problem of the individual magazine and its slant. However, we think your point is well-taken.

The field in which PS appears is known loosely as science-fiction. It has several facets: scientific fantastic, fantasy, and the like. “Stf” is the contraction for scientific or scientific fiction. Thus by combining words, we coin new words such as Stfiction, Stfantasy, Stfield, and the like. All pertain to pseudo-scientific and fantastic stories.

As to our “Hacks”—oh, well, let's say by the word.

Hope that the foregoing clears up a few points. Drop us another letter when you feel like it. Our field is a nice one, imaginative, futuristic and fun. You've got your feet wet; come on in—the water's fine.

Sincerely,

THE EDITOR.

## ACTION—PLUS!!

Chicago, Illinois.

SIRS:

Why is it that Pulp editors are forever either overestimating or underestimating the intelligence of their readers? Writers turn out stories the man behind the desk will buy, but because they are slanting to suit each individual editor (who in turn thinks he knows what his readers want) the hacks—professionals who have turned out material of proven merit in the past—lose their reputation with readers who have for years been staunch fans. For example: Ross Rocklynne. Ross has written stories that held me spellbound—plenty of action and suspense and sufficient imagination to supplant any lacking literary lavishness. Now he sends in stuff like *Cosmic Yo-Yo*; a dollar to a stale doughnut Ross punched out the words with one hand while he held his nose with the other. It's so far below the standard he's set



in the past it isn't even funny. (By the way, Ross, your yarn was the best in the book.)

Had this writer been so bold as to turn out a really bang-up adventure yarn, ten to one you would have rejected it. Readers (well, this one, anyway) are getting fed up with this stuff. Suppose, in a criminal court, a client forced his lawyer to present his case the way he (the client) wanted it presented. Or say a patient pestered the doctor into doing the job his way? To be brutally blunt, things would be in a hell of a mess—almost as bad a mess, maybe, as the Pulp Paper magazines are in today.

Remember that readers buy a pulp because they want action and suspense and momentary relief from a world of crying reality; they are fooled, by a cover containing a curvaceous gal and a big-chested he-guy into thinking they're going to get what they want. Naïve souls, they are tempted by a sending sub-title: **BLOODY ACTION STORIES**, Thundering Adventures on Far Off Worlds—The Universe of Tomorrow! When the sucker succumbs he finds inside, instead of crashing, bursting action that his soul craves, lilting little stories of human interest, drama, characterization, love—and the rest of that wretched trash, the bane of writers and readers alike. **PLANET STORIES** has come closest of all other sfiction magazines to hitting the spot—managing the happy medium; you've incorporated a little intrigue. Why (bless you) you sometimes slip us suffering subscribers a little fist-fight or two—sometimes even a space-battle, or a smashing war scene!

But you've undershot the mark; you made the level and went below it. Now your stuff lacks imagination and ingenuity. Yarns today are, inherently, cowboy westerns weighted down with six-shooters, waddies wearing space-suits instead of chaps or "store-boughten clothes." Here's a tip from one fan: Lift your flaps—aim a little higher scientifically, weave in as many fancy theories on the fourth dimension as you want, but keep the action coming. Make it an action story above all things, with the usual elements of suspense and color woven carefully into a thick plot. Don't think the reader is a damn fool, just take it for granted he wants action with his deeper reading—and give it to him! Circulation will soar!

THE HAPPY CYNIC.

We have quite a bit of respect for Rocklynn; he signed his story with his name! Which is to say to "Cynic" and his compatriots: "If you haven't the courage to sign your letters, then don't bother to send them in." As to the action angle; better take that up with Sarge Adams.

Sincerely,

THE EDITOR.

## PROHIBITION

1743 Delavan Avenue  
Buffalo, New York

DEAR WILBUR:

The little man with the dapper pencil-line mustache looked suspiciously through the peep-hole. "What do you want?" he whispered, in a voice tense with excitement.

"Joe sent me," I replied in a hoarse undertone. A slot immediately opened below the peep-hole. Looking cautiously around, I thrust two dimes into the slot. After a moment, I heard a sound like the opening of a vault or safe, and after a short interval, the summer issue of **PLANET** was

thrust into my hands. I placed it immediately in the secret lining of my overcoat, left the den of sin and wended my way home.

"*Red Witch of Mercury*" was a pretty good story, although it looked to me in spots as if the author had nothing to do but while away his time. Especially so around page fourteen. However, it had that thin coating of spice that we all love so well.

"*Prodigal Weapon*" was stolen from the plot of one of my lesser known classics, with only a minor change in the whole thing. Here is a condensation of my piece.

"Block's lightly tanned skin, bulging with tremendous muscles, dripped buckets of sweat. He paused momentarily in his soul destroying work of cutting the long green Molottian worms in half with his teeth. Immediately the heliotrope-skinned being from Molottite bashed him with his inch thick whip, leaving a dark red scratch on his brawny back. He resumed his work. There must be some way of conquering these hateful beings, he thought. Alas, but he knew they were invincible.

"Suddenly, he opened his mouth and emitted a loud belch, probably an effect of the meager dinner he had consumed. The Molottian opened his mouth in a soundless scream of agony, clapped his hands over his ears, and fell dead. Ah! Here was the secret. Block told the others and they started on the long march back to Earth, burping their way to freedom and an ever more powerful Terra."

"In my own personal opinion "*Raiders of the Second Moon*" stinks. It sounds just a little bit too impossible, the characterization is none too good, and besides, I don't like Science-Fiction that has anything to do with the war. I read it to get away from the war, not to keep up with it. "*Spider Men of Gharr*" started out like a hum-dinger, and sort of tapered off at the end. It was still the best in the whole book, though. The name "*Gharr*" sounds like what I say to my tobacconist when he tells me he hasn't got any cigarettes.

"*Mists of Mars*" was just a messed up bunch of words. I just positively could not see anything in that "tale." I hope you don't print anything like that again.

"*Cosmic Yo-Yo*" was a novel little piece, and I rather liked it. Who would want to live in a thing shaped like a dumb-bell, though? Not I. Every time you went from the first floor to the second, you'd have to squeeze through a little trapdoor.

"*Conging of the Gods*" was all right. Have seen much better, though. The theme hasn't been used before that I can remember.

The cover is better than last issue's. I like the dame's legs better, and the picture has something to do with the story. The hero's color doesn't seem just right. He looks a bit on the purplish side. Maybe because he was frozen so long.

Alas! I can no longer read the illustrious **PLANET**. The "den of sin" has been raided, and its proprietors sent up the river for influencing adversely the tone of public opinion. However, I am informed of another speakeasy where I can obtain your filthy rag. Since I have run out of dirty cracks to make about your really-very-nice-in-spite-of-it-all magazine, I shall say, as Dick Tracy said to Measles, "I'll see you in the funny papers."

Unsincerely,

BOB LAMBERT  
The Beelzebub.

## OUR BROOM-STICK GAL!

Big Springs Farm  
Freeport, Illinois  
R. R. 3

DEAR EDITOR:

Comes spring and PLANET once more. Also my semi-annual report on said issue. Something new has been added. Not a decent cover, however; that is too much to hope for. No, I mean the illustrations. Even Doolin turned out a very nice pic for "Red Witch—." The cover was the same old dish reheated and served up again. But I suppose an artist has to live too.

Is "Red Witch" going to be a series on the same order as the "Sandhound"? Somehow I scent the beginning of one in it. I liked it very much. A good likeable, readable story with some good solid characters in it. There is but one slight complaint to be made. The Red Witch of the title was far from being the central figure as the title led you to believe. That is a very minor point, tho. Mr. McDowell is to be complimented on his nice handling of the story. "Spider Men—" was also definitely enjoyable. I liked the beginning very much. The impression of the lapse of years, of solitude. Well, I really liked it, and I couldn't choose between the two stories if I had to. "Mists of Mars" did not strike me as being on the same level, but I will not say that it was not a nicely written story.

As for the shorts, for some reason I rarely find a short story that stands out as being par excellence. "Raiders of the Second Moon" was perhaps my favorite one of this issue. And the only word I can find for it is that it was cute. For that I deserve a slow death. I liked "Coming of the Gods" because the author's idea of presenting Mars as being in a state of primitive development. I had always been told that if Mars had life it would be ahead of us. But all should be fair in fiction. Rocklynn's short sounded like something he tossed off in a random moment. It just didn't click with me.

Ah ha, the Vizigraph. My first vote shall go to a very intelligent lady, Rose Jacobowitz. Politics, hah, why not? Second to Tom Pace. That explanation deserves an original of an undraped damsel. And third to Benson Perry for that wonderful original plot. Can't think of another thing so will have to sign off.

Sincerely,

VIRGINIA L. SHAWL  
(the original Red Witch)

## OI, THEM TAXES!

306 W. 11th St.,  
New York 14, N. Y.

HIE THEE EDITOR:

After endless slumberless nights wrestling with income tax returns, it's good to get the reek of figures out of one's head and turn to an odor of a different sort, one PLANET STORIES. Although I doubt if any of your scribes could dream up anything so utterly fantastic and eerily horrible as the standard income tax return form. On or about March 15th, one is ready to face invasions from Mars and any other spot with considerable equanimity.

Incidentally, I note from this issue's Vizigraph that your goodself has listed me as a Futurian. Prithee, gentle sir, what might that be? If it means that I'm sold on the idea that tomorrow might come after all, I presume it's correct. Or does it just refer to people, otherwise abnormal, who continue to purchase PLANET, despite the

sinking level of its fiction, and that indescribable (in a family magazine at least) accretion of retchability that goes under the name of illustrations and cover designs? Again, if so, okay.

From reading the yarns one Peacock turns out, and Hawkshaw about to the discovery that one Peacock also edits the journal, I get the faint idea that the aforementioned knows what a good story is, even if the magazine doesn't run them for the most part. Is it a case of just being unable to get anything better than the tripe that fills your pages, or is this what the readers demand? In either case, sir, you have my profound sympathy. (Looking over the Vizigraph, I suspect your public knows what it wants and is getting it! Then why do I continue to buy the monstrosity? Damned if I know. Inertia, perhaps—or perhaps the fact that the stories by one Wilbur S. are readable and there's always the faint possibility that another readable tale might also accidentally be included.)

And if you want to know why brother Marshall here writes you letters in the faint expectation of seeing them among the mess of idiocy that appears in the letter department—ssh, it's a secret, but I'm a masochist!

Yours,

EVERETT C. MARSHALL.

## REWRITE!

Dorothy, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

Because, for some reason, you did not print my last letter, I am writing a missive which I believe will make up for the faults of the last one.

I forgot, in my criticism, that it just was possible that the illustration for "Joe Carson's Weapon" was a reprint. Such was the case. Naturally then—uh, older type of pic would not be as modern as a modern one. Follow me? Now, as to the ratings, which run from .0 to .10.

"Red Witch of Mercury"—.3

"Prodigal Weapon"—.25

"Spider Men of Gharr"—.15

"Coming of The Gods"—.1

"Mists of Mars"—.1

"Cosmic Yo-Yo"—.06

"Raiders of the Second Moon"—.04

I watch your mag with interest every time it comes out, because, as a mag, you are unique. You follow no set rules, favor no particular authors, and are not addicted to printing pretty little scientific puzzles, instead of stories.

I have a special interest in the Vizigraph, as it clearly shows the ups and down in the life of Joe Fann. For instance, a certain chronic correspondent of yours, who for my safety will remain nameless, penned one particular type of story incessantly, until a short while ago. Suddenly he became an ardent De Pina lover, and plunged merrily into the latest De Pina yarn. A wise move, if I may say so.

I have several pet grouches, among them the fact that you insist on burning up your illustrators, making them illustrate practically whole issues by themselves, as witness last issue's lavish use of Anderson. Maybe you file pictures and use them as a story comes up that can use them, but I don't think so, as the pictures fit too well. I can also discern a definite trend toward the silly type of story. For instance, *Cosmic Yo-Yo*, *Joe Carson's Weapon*, and the *Mister Meek* stories. Said yarns are okay spread out, but a regular avalanche of them in the last few issues is souring the milk.

In conclusion, I want more De Pina, less of Kiemle in the illustrations, and more Anderson.

Sincerely yours,

ALGIS BUDRYS,  
*The Inimical Alien.*

## YEP, THAT'S LIFE!

616 N. Topeka,  
Wichita, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

I have a trifle of a confession to make. I thought because of the letters you print that your judgment wasn't so hot. Since you rejected those two short stories I sent you, my respect for your judgment has gone up considerably. They were pretty awful, weren't they? (No comment. Ed.)

Since it is so much easier to criticize a story than to write one I might as well join the parade. Your story "*Red Witch of Mercury*," while entertaining, left me rather puzzled. How can there be a sunrise on Mercury? Also that airgun that shot a slug the size of a quarter. Jaro used it because of its shocking power. I would like to know how that was managed. A .22 short has more shock than the most powerful airgun ever made. I am willing to bet that when and if the planets are conquered it won't be by any flame rifle, needle gun, para beam or any such hoop-la but by the old fashioned, accurate, hard hitting, and reliable Colt and Winchester. Any takers?

Concerning that story "*Raiders of the Second Moon*" I thought it was pretty well established that such things could not be, as it is impossible for an extra satellite to be hidden behind the moon. Willy Ley (it seems) had a technical article on it in another magazine.

The other stories were pretty fair but the trouble seems to be that they always ignore scientific facts. In that yo-yo story I would like to know how they could support a dead weight of one hundred and ten thousand tons by cables in Earth's gravity field. From any angle that mass would collapse of its own weight. (How's that again? Ed.) Also a yo-yo does not have two cables fastened to dead eyes. It has one cable fastened into a loop that fits loosely around the spindle of the yo-yo. Any other way it wouldn't work. I would like to know why it was necessary to deliver that asteroid to that girl's old man in order to save themselves from ruin. The girl didn't want them to and they were in a position to make more by not delivering it. Since it was mostly mercury that figures out to, say, eighty thousand tons of the metal. Mercury is currently selling at five dollars or more a pound and it doesn't drop below a dollar a pound. Eighty thousand tons at a dollar a pound figure out to one hundred and sixty million dollars. Think I would accept a little over half a million for it? Don't be silly.

As to Daniel's letter about the scoop that will alter our concepts; it claims to destroy all our history, religion, and science on the basis of what one man claims to remember from over fifty thousand years ago. There is less nonsense in one of Hitler's speeches.

Lewis Sherlock claims that it is impossible to have faster than light travel or communication. I have seen a description of the methods used to ascertain the speed of light and they are really no proof at all. It has never been proved that radio waves travel at light speeds. In addition there have been laboratory experiments in which radiation traveled at higher speed than light.

Furthermore the whole theory of inertial lag, warped space, the spectrum shift and so forth are only theories. I have seen the statement of a well known astronomer that they have never really been proved but seized upon because of their novelty. My opinion is that the so called inertial lag depends more on Earth's gravity than anything else and that interstellar travel is no more impossible than interplanetary is.

Well back to my typewriter for another story. I am willing to bet that if I get one printed that it will be picked to pieces in no time at all. Oh, well, that's life for you.

Sincerely yours,

EDWIN SIGLER.

## BEM?

2238 East 24th St.  
Brooklyn (29), N. Y.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

While wandering about in my friend and fellow fan's apartment house I suddenly remembered that the latest issue of *PLANET* comes out today. Jerking out my BEM (not a Bug-Eyed-Monster but a Beautiful-Escape-Machine) I jumped out of the sixth floor window. I push a button and out comes a parachute and I softly float down.

Upon landing, I jab another button. . . . Immediately the BEM takes off, with me holding on, and flies across the street to the drug store. I rap three times on the door, a panel opens and a claw comes out.

"What do you want," says a hollow voice.

"The latest *PLANET*," says I, putting twenty cents in the ha-whoops' claw.

Taking the book I surround myself by means of the BEM with a sphere of invisibility, and settle down to one of the best issues you have printed. For once I can't complain and that's something coming from a malcontent.

Here's how it shapes up:

1. "*Mists of Mars*." A swell story with a surprise ending. More from Mr. Whittington please. Too bad that picture wasn't whole.

2. "*Coming of the Gods*." One of the best shorts you've ever printed. Where have you been hiding Mr. Whitehorn. Picture nice.

3. "*Raiders of the Second Moon*." Another good short story but it had a terrible let down at the end.

4. "*Spider Men of Gharr*." Mr. Peacock you're improving by leaps and bounds.

5. "*Prodigal Weapon*." Better than average.

6. "*Red Witch of Mercury*." A good story but it just didn't seem to click. This will get me some threatening letters no doubt.

7. "*Cosmic Yo-Yo*." Oh, well!

The art work was fair the best being for "*The Red Witch of Mercury*." Let's have some Paul.

Why, oh why, are all the heroes so muscular and perfect, huh? Would you give us a little Bond or Binder please? Oh yeah, Bond's "*Wanderers of the Wolf Moon*" was perhaps the best of present volume.

Taking my BEM (I wrote this letter on it, it's a handy gadget) and beating a hasty retreat, I return to where I'm considered sane.

FRED GOLDBERG.

## OLD AGE GERRY!

4711 Verdun Ave.,  
Verdun, Quebec.

Dear Ed:

I have been reading science fiction and every type of planet story that I could lay my hands on since I was twelve years of age, and now that I am old, (all of seventeen) I believe I have some knowledge of this vast field of literature. (Where

the h— did I get that sentence?) So with my walking stick in one hand and a copy of *PLANET STORIES* clutched in the other, I will stagger through the Summer Issue with my opinions and not so witty comments.

First of all, though, I would like to compliment Tom Pace on his amusing and informative letter. I heartily agree with him and his ideas about the fair sex. Can't you just imagine how dry and dull a science story would become without a curvaceous heroine who dashes in, dressed in something she could safely hide in a compact? About the only interested readers would be aged professors who believe love to be only a chemical re-action. My answer to such—"Where is the nearest drugstore?" May I toss a few Orchids for your cover. For those fans who, like myself, are always worrying about all the angles, I think your cover provides more than enough for them this time. (Angles? Come now! Ed.)

And now let us enter the book and consider the stories in order of merit:

1. "*Red Witch of Mercury*." Well written, swell plot, how about more of the same?

2. "*Spider Men of Gharr*." Equally good except for one glaring flaw. Escaping from a spider man they used a boat powered by some power that the people had long forgotten how to manufacture. The power might last for 500 years but the boat was of wood. Good varnish? (The best, Ed.)

3. "*The Prodigal Weapon*." Well written. Too bad the plot is so similar to "*Spider Men of Gharr*."

4. "*Mist of Mars*." Swell, except for the errors. According to science the light gravity of Mars would make the people enormously tall, not normal height. Also it seems they think the air is much too thin for humans, yet our hero finds it just right. (Not necessarily—on either count. Ed.)

5. "*Invaders of the Second Moon*." After the drawing at the front this was really disappointing. First, who exactly invaded it and when? I also found the style too jumpy making the story a bit confusing.

In spite of all my criticism, I am really not as bad as I sound and so I hope nobody wishes strychnine tea upon me as they did Buchanan.

Your critical friend,

GERRY WILLIAMS.

## STALE CORN!

6615 Lawnview Ave.  
Cleveland 3, Ohio.

Dear Editor:

Barging unceremoniously into the Vizigraph, we find that the best letters in the Summer '45 issue are:

1. Benson Perry's stories. Humorous. But wot is this? How does he get two letters in one issue? How long has this been going on? Egad! Why hasn't someone informed me of these doings? I've got a Hope Chest (place where I keep letters I hope will be printed) full. You can expect several shipments soon. C.O.D., of course.

2. M. T. Headed, the imbecile who sends in my pics, and uses my typewriter to do it with. Besides, he doesn't bother to send a return envelope with 'em. Ye Gods! If he wasn't one of the few Cleveland fans. . . . By the way, what ever did happen to those pics? The one with the spiked globes was my best.

3. Ralph Gaines' letter, the only one my sister laughed at. Heh! She doesn't read STF for pleasure, she says, when I catch her at it. Just so she can sneer, she says. Heh. She sneered.

Then, of course, we mustn't forget the other letters. Or is "can't" a better word? Beverly Fickas had a pretty good one. Wot's a Ter-maganate? And wot kind of Martian script was that letter written in? It looked no more like English than Martian Crosmic, Kroomium, or even any of the Zagar hieroglyphics (I c'n spell!). (Nope. Ed.) Don't tell me they've made up a new one since I was to Mars?

Oh, sure, I've been to Mars. Been all over the blasted Universe. I'm the greatest Spatial explorer of all time, modestly speaking. (Of course, I'm only saying this because it's true.)

Wot? You sneer in disbelief? You jest? Egad! You mean you've never heard of my thrilling exploits to Messier 33? Gad! Nor of my breath-taking adventures on Halley's Comet where I defeated the tentacle-men of Zoxor VII, single-handed and unarmed? Egad! I must, *simply must*, write about them next time. Please, Willy, stop screaming and pounding your head on the wall. You're acting childish, and besides, you'll knock the plaster down.

Turning swiftly to the Vizigraph, we collide with Al Weinstein. There was nothing wrong with my letter, Weinstein. You need glasses, that's all. Big glasses. Perhaps it would help to hold the mag right-side-up, next time.

L'il ole lady Nora Loughren doesn't sound like fifty-five. Tsk, tsk, this younger generation. You know how women are. Until they reach the age of thirty-five, they're only twenty-six. After thirty-five, they're fifty-five years old till they kick the bucket.

I agree whole-heartedly with Willard Grimes. I, too, think Dallas' letter was extremely funny. I'm inclined to believe there's more fiction in Vizigraph than in the story section. Why not switch 'em?

I also agree with Tom Pace. I believe that Wilbur is the most amusing Vizifan of 'em all, although I'm not sure. I've never seen him. (This sort of stuff generally lays 'em out in the aisles . . . unconscious.)

Rene Dubois had a neat little thing, just the thing to show my English Teacher. Maybe this'll send her to the booby hatch with her unsuccessful predecessors.

Lewis Sherlock: I've always wondered why your ships crumpled like paper. Now I know. They're made of paper. No wonder there's a shortage. I strongly advise Gerald Mahsman not to take any offers from this flat-headed fanatic. Why not help me to organize my new company, *Galactic Teleportation, Inc.*? No grimy rocket room jobs, no sweating, no boredom waiting in a ship plunging thru space. *Galactic Teleportation* offers instant service, safe, with all the luxuries of home.

Well, as the French say, Aufwiedersehen.

STFectionately yours,

G. DALLAS.

## WHAT'S BITING BETHEL?

1817 E. 33rd Street  
Brooklyn 10, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

This letter was written with the purpose of hurling one brickbat and a few orchids. The brick goes to, "The Disgusted Bystander." (I always use upper case.) Just what in the world are you mad at Mr. Bethel? Are you taking it out on one fan? Milt Lesser is not the only one you know. I can agree with you in part but that is as far as it goes. Are you also taking it out only on the

readers of PS? All fans aren't, "Eloquent Slanderers," there are few of these, if any. If you insist on stating that letter-hacking, is a braggart's way of drawing attention, then some pretty swell fans go under a terrific beating.

Then, your idea of, "Verbally spitting in the author's eye. Can you honestly believe that to be the only occupation of some of the fen? You can't judge many fans by a few, and then the real fans ignore these "few" anyway. So, I see your letter has to me little or no point. I am not a regular reader of PS and then, I buy it mostly for the readers' column. It happens to be, by virtue of a fen poll, one of the four favorite fen mags.

WHEW!!!! That's over!! Now for my orchids. The first goes to S. Mason for his idea of a supplement. More ideas like this and we'll have a caucus. (Nyah) It may be a lot of work. The second goes to W. Kessel for showing Hetschel da diff between hacks and honest-to-goodness fen. The moving finger writes, and, having writ, let's hear no more of it (the way I mess up Omar!) Such clutterings on in the Vizigraph. But then who cares, it's a swell lot of fun, so help me!!! Who cares about the covers (I do). And Oh, PLEASE stop even mentioning dear old E.F.B. soooo much. Aw fellas, quit it.

Sincerely,

R. J. GAULIN.

## SHOWOFF!

4 Arlington Avenue  
Baldwin, New York

Dear Editor Peacock:

Honest, I wasn't bribed but I think "*Spider Men of Gharr*" was good; it was the best in the issue. I hate to admit it, I don't want to admit it but I gotta. It was real swell, it held me in thrall all the way through. Speaking of thrall, you used that word four times in the story. 'Course that isn't so bad but using such an unusual word so often seems strange. This one stuck out like a sore thumb every time you saw it.

Emmett McDowell's story was hep, too. (Cam-arade!) I am glad to see that he has gotten with it at last. Compare this with "*The Happy Castaway*." Some improvement.

The story by one of your newcomers, Vaseleos Garson was good, too. It's too bad you had to put both this one and yours in the same issue. They're practically identical in basic science. I guess you guys are hard up, though. It seems that way, all the new authors you're introducing. All your old authors must be in the service. Well, maybe your new authors will get by with it soon, and then everything will be solid again.

The Vizigraph was in there this time (per usual) and in my (humble) opinion the best letters were 1. Tom Pace (naturally). 2. Frank Wilimczyk, Jr. (he's an active, no less). 3. James R. Adams.

Adam's story in the Spring ish, by the way, was superb.

Now, here is a good deal, the post-war PLANET STORIES. Good covers, no more of the terrible triplets. Illustrations by Lawrence, Clyn, Finlay, Paul and Leydenfrost. (Break a couple of hundred thousand out of the treasury will you Peacock, and get Leydenfrost back.) Stories by Henry Hasse, Ross Rocklyne, millions of stories by Leigh Brackett and oodles of Henry Kuttner and bushel baskets full of Ray Bradbury! Send Hasse to us by truckloads. Thanks.

Sincerely yours,

FRANK CLARK.

## MASKED MAHSMAN!

Hannibal, Missouri  
R. R. No. 1

Dear Editor Peacock:

Near the small city of Hannibal, on a lonely hill, stood a solitary building. In the center of one room stood a gigantic telescope pointed at the moon. Nearly a middle-aged man nervously paced about. At frequent intervals he would gaze into the telescope, seemingly waiting for something to happen. What he saw was a sleek-looking rocket ship making dizzy circles around the moon. At the controls sat yours truly, testing a new rocket fuel. Sweat was running down my face, and I hung onto the controls with all my might. As I travelled around and around I hastily took down data. All at once a red light flashed on the control board and the loud speaker snapped on. I listened intently—"Ah, my friend, I have good news for you. The Summer Issue of PLANET STORIES is out. Come at once, before all copies are sold out." At that I switched off the communicator and headed for Earth.

Hours later a lone figure, pulling a mask over his face, stepped into a drug store. I tossed 20 cents onto the counter, grabbed my magazine, and was gone like a flash of lightning, out the door.

Minutes later I sat down in a comfortable chair and gazed at the cover of PS. Ah, what is this, I said to myself. Yes it is, another cover by Parkhurst, and what a beauty she is. If anybody says otherwise, I hereby challenge them to a duel. You name the weapon.

Turning to the contents page I hastily scan it. Another good lineup. Ah, here is a novel by Peacock, good for you, Wilbur!

And so, turning another page, I read. I never stopped once until I had read the complete magazine. In my opinion, your "*Spider Men of Gharr*" takes first place. That is the kind of story I like. Furthermore, Lura is the kind of gal I could go for. I sure would like to meet some gal like that, Oh, Brother—

The Vizigraph had a number of very interesting letters this issue. The three best were those of Weinstein, Pace and Adams.

All in all, the Summer Issue was very good. I really enjoyed it, just keep that up and I'll be satisfied.

Your magazine is not perfect by a long shot. Neither is any other magazine for that matter. Perfection is something that cannot be accomplished on this dreary world of ours. And if perfection did come about, what would we have to live for? No advancement, no nothing. Just a humdrum sort of life.

And so bidding you adieu until next time, I once more take over the controls of my space ship and continue making circles around the moon. I'll be waiting—

Sincerely yours,

GERALD MAHSMAN.

## NEW ORLEANS, AWAKE

1303 Mystery Street,  
New Orleans 19, La.

Dear Editor:

It's me again—New Orleans' gift to fandom. And no need for me to tell what I'm going to comment on, for it should be apparent to all. So here goes:

Cover: One dollar gets you two that Parkhurst is Irish! For, on the last three covers the gooa,

villain, BEM—whatever you want to call him—has been a very vivid shade of green! On the present cover the monster is a half dinosaur, half sabre-toothed tiger thing with green skin!

Illustrations: The best was Clyne's on pages 54-55; second was Doolin's on page 43; third, Kiemle's on page 107. And, er, in case I should win an original, those are the ones I'd like, in order of preference.

Stories: I'll list these, not in order of preference, but as they are listed on the contents page.

"Red Witch of Mercury." Sort of corny, but it had an original ending, which saved it.

"Spider Men of Gharr." I sort of suspected after the fifth page that the Gharrians were robots. But I was entirely unprepared for the idea of defeating them with supersonics.

"Mist of Mars." Another piece with a clever ending.

"Prodigal Weapon." and "Raiders of the Second Moon." The less said about these two, the better.

"Cosmic Yo-Yo." A ridiculous little piece, written in a light vein.

"Coming of the Gods." Nice little yarn.

Ah, yes. "The Ringer Family." It wouldn't be a bad idea for Gifford to do a cover. But the trouble is that people would mistake the mag for Planet Comics.

Now, la Vizi!

Tom Pace. Shake, fellow wolf, shake. Liked your letter a great deal. But you are praising the wrong people. If you're a stf fan, you praise Cthulhu, Azathoth, Shub-Niggurath, and Yog-Sothoth, not Saints Patrick, Michael, Francis, and Peter.

Al Weinstein. So-so, but you have done better. Much better.

Rose Jacobowitz. Nice, level-headed young lady.

René Dubois. Amusing. Reminiscent of beard-mutterings.

James R. Gray. You seem to have enjoyed "Joe Carson's Weapon" as much as I did.

Lewis Sherlock. Could Sherlock's Super Space Ships, Inc. use a representative on Saturn? If so, I'm your man. Speaking of Saturn, I hear that the Saturnians go around with cotton in their ears, because they can't stand the ring of their planet. Awright, so it stinks.

Cygni. I liked your letter on the eternal triangle. Sixty-four Dollar Question. What well known writer for PLANET originally came from New Orleans?

Answer: Albert DePina. Yes he did, believe it or not! I'm as surprised as you are.

Fictionally yours,

E. E. GREENLEAF, JR.

## SCIENCE!

Route 6, Box 37,  
Kingsport, Tenn.

Dear Mr. Peacock:

I have read science fiction for years as a hobby and have enjoyed PLANET STORIES from its first issue, although I must say the quality of it has steadily risen until, at the present time, it rates next to Astounding with the extant magazines. As you probably know technical men who read science fiction prefer Astounding, but that should not bother you as Campbell and PLANET are publishing a different type of story. Therefore, in its class each rates well. PLANET's stories are excellent adventure laid in the future with inter-

planetary travel an accepted fact, while Astounding's stories are really problems in sociology, economics, politics and psychology. They should not be compared, as each is different, just as an apple is different from a peach. The one that one would prefer to read would depend upon the emotional feelings of the moment, so I hope you will not feel badly if I rate Astounding as being above, and also, different from PLANET. I like your selections quite well. You know, in spite of the kicks regarding Ray Cummings, he has in the past written some outstanding fiction, and a few of his stories in PLANET were quite good.

I was interested in your use of supersonics in your story, "Spider Ben of Gharr." The story is interesting and well written. I doubt if the scrapping of an object on a solid surface by manual pressure would develop true supersonics, but you would get sounds above audibility under the right conditions. In fact supersonics usually refer to wave spectrum bands above fifty to sixty thousand vibrations. Very few human ears can detect as high as thirty thousand, so you have quite an inaudible range. When the War began I got to wondering if it were possible to develop a lethal weapon from supersonics. So as I was doing research work at M. I. T. at Cambridge at that time I got hold of several technical works on supersonics (ultrasonics) and worked through them to some extent. I then found the difficulty. As you recall, vibrations of about half a million per second will shatter blood cells, kill fish, char wood, etc., and they are often made by a vibrating quartz rod under oil or water surfaces by high frequency current. The joker is, that in the lethal frequency range, the absorption coefficient of air is so high that fifty per cent of the energy output is absorbed by the air at about an inch distance from the vibrator, and in a few inches they are not detectable to any extent. In water this range extends out to about a thousand feet as I recall, and in solids for several miles. Therefore, if we had a supersonic generator giving out the right lethal vibrations, the air around it would get hot, but you wouldn't be able to kill a man fifty feet away, and even under water it is not very good, because the capacity for a steel hull like a submarine to absorb energy is so great that a supersonic generator would be an expensive way of knocking it off; bombs would be a lot cheaper. In spite of that I am interested in seeing supersonic weapons in science fiction, in spite of the fact that I doubt their being developed on a practical scale.

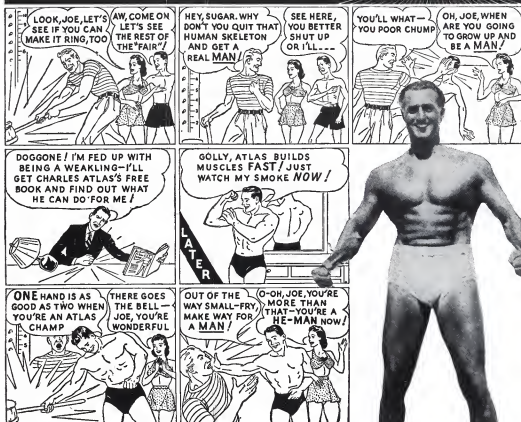
I had just as well review the Summer number as I am writing anyway. "Red Witch of Mercury" was quite interesting, and the plot well handled. "Mists of Mars" was too darn thought provoking. It could happen. "Spider Men of Gharr" has been noted above. "Prodigal Weapon" had one weakness. Can protoplasm stand up against anything! I have my doubts. "Raiders of the Second Moon," was clever, but as you probably recall it is dynamically impossible to have a satellite behind another one permanently. "Cosmic Yo-Yo" was the poorest in my opinion, but still readable. Perhaps it hit me at the wrong mood. "Coming of the Gods" was clever and true satire. Unfortunately we have injured any primitive people we have come into contact with, and it will be the same if we meet any off the earth. I do not care for "The Ringers." The Vizigraph is usually quite interesting.

Sincerely yours,

DR. THOMAS S. GARDNER.



# The Insult "CHUMP" Into a CHAMP



## I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too, in Only 15 Minutes a Day!

HAVE YOU ever felt like Joe—absolutely fed up with having bigger, huskier fellows "push you around"? If you have, then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'LL PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality!

"Dynamic Tension." That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a scrawny, 87-pound weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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*Charles Atlas*

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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